Fakirmohan Senapati

Mayadhar Mansinha

Makers of Indian Literature

In the sixties of the last century, three budding intellectuals of Orissa met at Balasore and became life-long friends. And each of them ushered in fresh trends in Oriya literature. Of these, Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao had had excellent English education and were well-placed in life. But the third member of the trio—Fakirmohan Senapati (1843-1918) had not even a good primary education, and life to him was a prolonged battle for existence.

But unfortunately there has not been an estimable biography in Oriya of the father of modern nationalism of the Oriyas and of modern Oriya literature. This monograph compiled by the late Dr. Mayadhar Mansinha is a pioneering effort to build up, as objectively as possible, the literary as well as the human image of Fakirmohan, out of materials supplied by himself in his overpowering autobiography in Oriya.

The story of Fakirmohan Senapati is indeed the story of the Renaissance of Oriya national life and of Oriya literature in the nineteenth century.

Cover layout : Satyajit Ray
Art-letter and portrait : Shyamal Sen
Price : Rs. 2·50

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

FAKIRMOHAN SENAPATI

MAYADHAR MANSINHA

SAHITYA AKADEMI

NEW DELHI

First Published 1976

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172, Naigaon Cross Road, Bombay 400 014

Price : Rs. 2.50 p.

Printed by S. C. Ghose at Calcutta Press Private Limited, 1 Raja Subodh Mullick Square, Calcutta-700 013 and published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

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FOREWORD

THERE is as yet no worthwhile, not to speak of an estimable, biography of Fakirmohan Senapati, even in Oriya. This may be due, in part at least, to his overpowering autobiography in the language, negativising any such attempt. But what the self-story of an undoubted genius reveals, should not be taken to be the whole thing either about himself or of men and matters he tells us about. Above all, the sense of totality or of a full-size figure, that a well-written biography is likely to impart to readers, can never be expected as an autobiography, however interesting. This little book in English may be taken, therefore, thanks to the Sahitya Akademi, as an humble pioneering effort to build up, as objectively as possible, the literary as well as the human image of Fakirmohan, out of materials supplied by himself and others.

The souvenir that Fakirmohan Sahitya Parishad of Balasore brought out in 1956 threw much valuable light on Fakirmohan the man, containing as it does reminiscenses of people who had personally known the great novelist. But if any single person deserves encomia in the matter of Senapati-studies in Oriya, I would unhesitatingly point my fingers towards Dr. Natabar Samantaray. The following pages carry significant debts to the studies of Samantaray as well as to the souvenir mentioned above.

Mr. Ananta Mishra, Proprietor of Messrs Cuttack Students' Store, a publishing house of Orissa, deserves warm thanks, not only for having brought out well-edited collected works of Fakirmohan, but also for bringing out the unexpurgated autobiography of Fakirmohan, on which his son Mohini Mohan had freely exercised his unscrupulous axe. I am personally thankful to Mr. Ananta Mishra and to Mr. Sridhar Mahapatra, Proprietor of Messrs. Grantha Mandir, another publishing house of Cuttack, for supplying me with all their publications on Fakirmohan when I started this dwarf narrative of a real giant.

M. MANSINHA

original surname of Malla.

FAKIRMOHAN'S GRANDMA

Kusa Matta, the third descendant of Hanu Malla, died prematurely just before the British took over Orissa in 1803 from the Marathas, leaving behind a young widow with two small boys.

This young widow, Kuchila Dei, left a profound impression on Fakirmohan, deeply colouring all his works with her image of a selfless ministering angel. But he relates in his autobiography, how it was through this young widow Kuchila Dei's pathetic simplicity that the Mallas lost for the second time their sizable ancestral lands in the district of Balasore.

Of Kuchila Dei's two orphaned boys, Purushottam and Lakshmana Charan, it is the younger Lakshmana Charan who has the glory of being the progenitor of a genius such as Fakirmohan, born in January, 1843. But on his return journey home from a pilgrimage to Puri the unlucky Lakshmana Charan died of cholera at Bhubaneswar at a very early age. At that tragic hour, Fakirmohan was only a year and five months old. Tulasi Dei, the shocked young mother of Fakirmohan, took to bed in sheer grief and was mercifully rid of the prolonged misery of widowhood by death, just after a year. The unfortunate baby's sole hope and refuge were now his grandmother, Kuchila Dei, herself a helpless widow.

Chapter II

A CINDERELLA CHILD

WITH the loss of their extensive rent-free lands, the rich, aristocratic Mallas of Mallikashapur became poor commoners overnight. We do not know how the young widow Kuchila Dei brought up the two orphaned little Mallas. But we presume that the pious lady had taken life's obligations in her stride. She not only brought up her two boys, but got them married also as soon as they reached adolescence. The ageing lady was perhaps happy, at least for some time, in a long life of sufferings, when she saw two of her grown-up stalwart sons earn good money abroad, with two young daughters-in-law to order about inside her home. But it seems, the good lady was not destined to enjoy long even little happiness in her long life. Death, snatching away in quick succession, as already recorded, her younger son and his wife, increased her already heavy burden of grief as a sorrowing widow herself. She appears to have somehow borne down even that terrific shock because of her deep attachment to the ever-ailing grand-child left behind by her second son. It was this sickly and unfortunate baby that later reoriented a whole national literature as Fakirmohan Senapati.

THE MINISTERING ANGEL

The unstinting paeans that Fakirmohan has sent out towards the sacred and loving memory of his simple, illiterate grandmother, indirectly in his stories and novels and directly in his autobiography in fervid profusion, move every reader and prove where indeed true feminine superiority lies.

Says he :

"For seven to eight years after the death of my parents, I suffered from painful ailments, like chronic diarrhoea, dysentery and piles, and was practically bed-ridden all the time. But I remember grandma sat by my bedside day and night. Days followed days, weeks followed weeks, months followed months and even years followed years. But completely oblivious of even sleep or hunger, dear grandma was sitting by my bedside in almost ceaseless vigil, day in and day out. It was as though a serious tug-of-war was going on between the Death God on one side and my grandmother on the other, to possess me. And the final victory, at last, was my grand-mother's. I started convalescing.

FROM BRAJAMOHAN TO FAKIRMOHAN

"During that prolonged period of my sufferings, my grandmother used to implore all possible gods and goddesses supposed to be flourishing in this world, to spare my life. There were two Muslim *pirs* at Balasore at that time, with supposed mystic powers to fulfil prayers of people in distress. Frustrated with all the Hindu gods and goddesses that existed in and around Balasore, grandma at last stuck, with all the vehemence of her soul, to the supposed mercifulness of those two departed Muslim saints. And she vowed to those kind *pirs* that, if her child recovered, she would make him a very slave of theirs, a *fakir* ! My original name was Brajamohan. But after recovery, grandma, out of gratitude to those Muslim *pirs*, re-christened me in the half-Muslim fashion as Fakirmohan.

"I got well. But grandmother could not muster enough courage in her maternal heart to completely surrender me to the *pirs*. As a way out, she made me a *fakir* for at least eight days every year during the great Muslim festival of Moharrum. For those eight days, she trimmed me up like a genuine Muslim *fakir*, with a flowing motley dress, a dervish cap, a lacquer stick, and a multi-coloured bag hanging on one side. With my face whitened with powdered chalk, I used to leave our house early morning and beg all day in the streets and by-lanes of Balasore in those outlandish habiliments. I returned home by the evening. Grandmother sold the rice I had collected as alms

and, with that money, offered ritualistic victuals to the *pirs*."

THE UNWANTED BRAT

With Fakirmohan's father Lakshmana Charan Senapati dead, his uncle Purushottam naturally became the sole bread-earner and head of the family of the Mallas. But he and his wife did not cherish the idea of that sickly nephew of theirs sharing their earnings. They never even tried to conceal their bitter feelings against him as an unwelcome burden.

It was not possible for child Fakirmohan to obtain any regular education in such inhospitable milieu. Thanks to his prolonged sickness, he could not even begin learning the alphabet before the age of 9, and that too in an old-type primary school, where he had to meet part of the teacher's fees with personal services. When other students happily left for their homes, little Fakirmohan had to stay on to help the teacher in his cooking, washing utensils and doing other odd jobs. Nevertheless, his flint-hearted uncle was none too pleased, since his nephew was never caned as his own and other children often were. He, therefore, refused to pay the teacher the meagre charges on Fakirmohan, arguing that there could not be any real education without cane-strokes on a pupil's back !

And to get his dues, the teacher had at last to yield to the jealous uncle's logic. Once when the uncle happened to be at the school, he put a dozen or so merciless strokes on Fakirmohan's back, for no apparent reason whatsoever. The poor boy howled in agony and ran to his grandmother, his only haven in life. The shocked old lady came running out of the inner apartments straight to the teacher, bitterly scolding him with the pathetic words, "Well, master, haven't you kiddies of your own? How could you spank a child like this for nothing?"

But, notwithstanding grandma's protests, the teacher, poor fellow, had to enact this show of pedagogic discipline several times to get his dues from his heartless uncle.

However, child Fakirmohan's desire for knowledge was so insatiable that, in spite of his odd experiences, he could make time, of some evenings, to call on another teacher in the town to pick up some Persian, of which he could exhibit a working

mastery in later life.

But even the meagre scholastic success of the unwanted nephew was too much for the jealous uncle and aunt to stand much longer. Hence, while they shifted their own children to prestigious modern-type primary schools run by Christian missionaries, they put a dead stop to Fakirmohan's inchoate education and deployed him as a wage-earner at the quayside of Balasore at the young age of 10 or so.

Chapter III

· LABOUR-BOY WITH SCHOLASTIC ASPIRATIONS

Long before Job Charnock raised mud-huts on the left bank of the Hooghly where later on the imperial city of Calcutta sprang into being, the British had a thriving entrepot at Balasore.

The flourishing conditions of the harbour city of Balasore live for ever in the tell-tale descriptions left by Fakirmohan in his autobiography, as he knew its quaysides as a work-boy only too well. He is also the sole writer in Oriya literature who later gave the Oriyas, so proud of their ancient maritime glory, the only genuine stories of sea-voyage and oceanic commerce, with the terror of the winds and waves and the twang of the brine. The background of such stories was of course his child-labour-days at Balasore. And thus says he in his autobiography of what he saw at the port :

"During my childhood days, Balasore was a very prosperous maritime entrepot. Five to six hundred ships used to sail in and out. The majority of them carried Orissa's salt, while others took various consumer goods, to distant ports of Rangoon, Madras, Colombo or different islands in the Indian ocean. Those were the days of sailing ships, steamers being still unheard-of. Six to twelve sails of various sizes and shapes were needed according to the type of vessel. Some sails had to be triangular, some rectangular and some even had to be irregular in shape. If the sails exceeded the required measurements, the vessels ran the risk of getting overturned in a storm; with under-sized ones, they might not sail at all. The uninitiated were likely to blunder with these measurements.

"Both my father and my uncle earned their livelihood as

ship-contractors. The maritime merchants generally got their canvasses through contractors. And they in turn employed tailors. There were hundreds of tailors and cutters working at our house in my childhood days, engaged solely in sail-making. This was quite a profitable business".

BRINE DIAMONDS

But by the time Fakirmohan went to Balasore port as a labour-boy, it was no more than the sun-set glamour. His worldly uncle therefore drafted him into the Excise (Salt) Department, when he could clearly see the decline in the port's fortunes.

Late in life, Fakirmohan often heaved deep sighs of agony at the sad change for the worse his once-prosperous native city had undergone as a result of the closing-down of the port. Says he in his autobiography :

"Balasore was well-known not only in India but all over Europe as a port and mart. Before they settled down in Bengal, the Dutch, the Danish, the French and the British traders opened their trading stations at Balasore. But fortunes change, rise and fall being the law of life. And Balasore seems to prove this to the hilt. The same river-front that was noisy with crowds of thousands from immemorial times, is, alas, deathly quiet now, covered with jungles and no more even visited by any human being. The bed of the river is high now with silt and sand. The class of prosperous traders and ship-owners has vanished, leaving both the entire internal and external commerce of Balasore to the control of outsiders."

More than rice and textiles, salt appears to have been the most valuable export from the port of Balasore. Fakirmohan says, "Whatever prosperity Balasore enjoyed was really due to salt. Right from the mouth of the river Subarnarekha in north Balasore, down to that of the Mahanadi at Dhamra in the south, salt was extensively manufactured all along the coast. In those days, rural Bengal knew only Balasore salt. The salt-based Excise Department of the government had become the sole means of livelihood of the citizens of Balasore."

GOVERNMENT MONOPOLY OF SALT

But the port could not long enjoy even this consolation prize of salt export. Says Fakirmohan with natural sorrow : "It was unfortunate, not only for Balasore, but for the whole of Orissa, that only too soon orders arrived, prohibiting salt manufacture and abolishing the entire concerned department. Orissa's goddess of prosperity left her soil to settle at distant Liverpool and other places in England."

Patriotic Fakirmohan could never forget this mishap for his city and district or for Orissa, as a whole. Late in 1907 when he was already sixty-four years in age, he published a pathetically realistic account of the forgotten indigenous salt-manufacture in Balasore, pinpointing what economic ruin its abolition had meant to the people and what prosperity its continuance might have spelled out to them. Nearly half a century before salt became a symbol of human rights in India's war of freedom under Mahatma Gandhi, Fakirmohan had raised his lone voice for the revival of indigenous salt manufacture in India. Says he :

"Formerly, my countrymen got gold from abroad in exchange of (saline) earth. But now, they barter away their gold for Western trash. As I have said already, Balasore district alone used to manufacture nine lakh maunds of salt. If that had been allowed to continue, the amount of manufacture would have risen by now, even at the most conservative estimate, to at least twenty lakh maunds. This would be bringing to the district at least Rs. 10 lakhs a year, if not more. And imagine how the salt-trade would have benefited the Oriya sea-faring Kaibartas in particular, if they were initiated into modern scientific ways of navigation.

"These days Balasore is only apparently prosperous. Behind the show of wealth lie levers and brakes on our whole economic life controlled entirely by outsiders. And not the merchants alone but all the big officers in various government departments also, are from other lands. Oriyas cannot even dream of a single job in the railway that runs through their land. Agriculture remains the sole means of sustenance of the Oriyas. But where is enough cultivable land for all? Oh Lord, why

don't you descend unto the benevolent government's heart and make it revive indigenous manufacture of salt in Balasore as before?"

A RESTLESS SEEKER OF KNOWLEDGE

Behind all these epoch-making changes, the apparently insignificant, ill-clad and sickly child-labourer of ours was slowly but indefatigably acquiring knowledge from all sources he could lay his shaky hands on. When he was apprenticed by his uncle to a notary public in the Salt Department, he found time for picking up snatches of Bengali, Persian as well as Sanskrit from different teachers. This appetite for knowledge remained with him all his life. Happening to be for some time at Tekkali in the present Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, he promptly arranged the services of pundit to acquire some knowledge of Telugu, even though he was already more than fifty years old then. And his mastery of English may be symbolic of all his intellectual adventures. He didn't know a word of it till he was 23. By that time he was already Head Pundit of the Mission School at Balasore. For an English-ignorant native pundit, he however was a man to reckon with in the city of Balasore, respected even by foreigners for his innate brilliance of mind. But piqued on one occasion by a European Officer's orderly, he started learning English, the royal language, immediately.

And it needed no more than a short elementary initiation to enable this genius to look after himself on the slippery road to any knowledge. He says in his autobiography that entirely through self-labour, with just a dictionary to guide him, he went through the *Arabian Nights, Robinson Crusoe, Bengal Peasant Life* by Lal Behari De, the English *Bible*, etc. That was all the English he studied. And the knowledge of the language which he obtained out of that limited self-study was so thorough that it stood him in good stead all through his long official as well as public career.

SECOND ADVENTURE IN SCHOOLING

After the abolition of the Salt Department at Balasore,

Fakirmohan, a young man of about 15 by that time, seemed to be nobody's concern any longer. The majority of officials being Bengali, left for Bengal to be absorbed in other government departments. The locals however were found to listlessly wander about the office premises for some time. Unemployed Fakirmohan was one in that unlucky throng. But it was this purposeless loafing about which seems to have helped germinate his individuality. The neglected orphan boy took a decision at last on his own. He determined to add a little more regular education to the mere rudiments that he had already acquired through his irregular private efforts.

Without informing even his grandmother, Fakirmohan got himself enrolled at the Mission School at Barabati, a suburb of Balasore. At that time he was going about semi-naked. He had not even an upper garment while his cousin Nityananda attended classes draped in costly satins. Vicious jealousy and meanness so deeply percolated the whole family that Nityananda would not agree even to share his hurricane lantern with him for the evening studies.

But studying even under such adverse conditions, young Fakirmohan felt overjoyed at his very first taste of such new subjects as history, geography and mathematics. It was like young Keats going through, for the first time, Chapman's *Homer*. The teachers were all pleased with Fakirmohan's mental brilliance as well as his sincerity and humility. But the unfortunate young scholar could not afford the school fee of even four annas (25 paise) per month. It was in arrears month after month. If the uncle did yield, against much personal reluctance, to the combined appeals of the headmaster as well as of grandma in the first year, he decisively refused to help in the second year. After six months of hard struggle Fakirmohan had to give up at last, in sheer disgust and despair.

END OF HIS EDUCATION

It looks so ironic that the man, who ushered in the modern age to a whole historic State, could not finish even his primary education, because of his inability to scrape together four annas (25 paise) a month for his school fees.

The bitter frustration of the ambitious young scholar could not escape the notice of his simple and doting grandmother. Her only words of consolation and inspiration to her dearest grandchild were : "Why do you worry so much about education, my darling? Just live on, my dear one, and you will yourself see how much money you will earn in life!"

And the old illiterate grandma's words, stemming out of the depths of purest blessed love, proved prophetic only too soon.

CHAPTER IV

TEACHER, WRITER AND PUBLICIST

FORCED out of school due to his inability to pay a monthly fee of only four annas (25 paise), poor Fakirmohan did not know what else to do. With jealous, and unkind uncle and aunts, what was known as his 'home' was no less than a hell to him.

He, however, did not have to wait long in such dark despair. Very soon the post of a teacher in his former school fell vacant and the headmaster could not think of a better choice than the innately brilliant Fakirmohan, even though he lacked the necessary formal certificates. He was therefore invited in, on a salary of Rs. 2½ per month, which, though it might appear ludicrous in these inflationary times, made his grandmother run about in supreme happiness over that first great achievement of her beloved grandchild.

THE PATRIOTIC PUBLICIST

And the authorities of the Barabati School were so pleased with the way Fakirmohan managed his pupils that, unasked, they soon raised his salary from Rs. 2½ to Rs. 4, which was quite a considerable income at that time when a paisa was more than a rupee of these days, in its purchasing power.

From the very start, young Fakirmohan turned out a resourceful and effective teacher. For teaching geography, for instance, he prepared his own maps, as these were not easily available. In the third year of his schoolmastering, he was asked to teach mathematics. He mastered arithmetic, algebra and trigonometry, all by himself. He had not been taught these subjects at school, nor was there anybody at Balasore who could

help him effectively with algebra and trigonometry. That he was a very successful teacher of literature and history in particular, goes without saying. Thus the erstwhile labour-boy was now transformed, as though by a miracle, into an extraordinarily brilliant teacher in not one, but many subjects, as variant as mathematics and literature.

HIS EUROPEAN FRIENDS

His successful role as a teacher so thoroughly established his reputation that when the responsible post of headmaster of the Christian Mission School, the only respectable educational institution that time at Balasore, fell vacant, the European Mission authorities unhesitatingly installed him in that covetable office, with a salary of Rs. 10 per month.

And it was this change-over which turned to be a jumping-board to country-wide celebrity for young Fakirmohan. It was here that he, for the first time, came in close touch with Europeans, both officials and missionaries. Of them all, the most important were Rev. E. C. B. Hallam, the Secretary of the school, and Mr. John Beames, the District Collector. Beames, the British civilian, has left behind everlasting reputation as a linguistic in his authoritative book *Comparative Grammar of the Indian Languages*. He was not only a thorough scholar, but also an efficient administrator. His recently published autobiography, *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, throws a flood of light on many a dark recess of Indian society and administration in the last century.

FAKIRMOHAN AND BEAMES

On coming to Balasore, Beames took the earliest opportunity of learning Oriya for a comparative study of its grammar with that of sister languages, like Bengali, Assamese and Hindi, which he had already mastered. When he searched for a teacher well-versed not only in Oriya, but also in Bengali and Sanskrit, Rev. Hallam, without hesitation, recommended Fakirmohan as the most suitable person for that unusual responsibility.

The inquisitive reader had better learn of their first meeting and the subsequent developments in Fakirmohan's own words.

Says he :

"Both among the British civilians and the Indian elite, John Beames was reputed to be a brilliant scholar. He had mastered no fewer than eleven languages. He was busy, while at Balasore, with his *Comparative Grammar of the Indian Languages*. Rev. Hallam, our Secretary, was also a devoted student of literature, and deep friendship had sprung up between the two on that account. For his quinti-lingual grammar, Beames needed a pundit with a fairly good knowledge of Oriya, Bengali and Sanskrit. Rev. E. C. B. Hallam, ever my well-wisher, took me along one day and introduced me to Beames. During the very first interview, he questioned me about the uses of some affixes and prepositions in Sanskrit. Somehow my replies so convinced him that he immediately noted them down for incorporation in his comparative grammar. And this single event earned me the reputation among the Europeans of Balasore of being a great Indian scholar.

"Beames requested me to meet him at least once every week. And we would be eagerly looking forward to this weekly visit. If and when there was a delay of a day or two, he would gently greet me with the words, '*Babu*, why did you delay so much?' All our discussions related solely to languages. The discussions ranged from explanation of difficult Sanskrit quatrains to incantations against snakes and witches current among the masses as well as the Oriya rhetorical classic *Rasakallola*.

"My contact with the Britishers and their high regard for me gave me enormous official advantage. All the big Bengali officers, not to speak of the small fry in the lower echelons of the Collectorate, could not now speak to me except with deference and distance.

"In all my humble efforts at spread of female education at Balasore and improvement of the Oriya language, I had excellent support and patronage from Beames. He was behind me also in many a crisis of my personal life, always lending a helping hand to lift me out of serious difficulties. In a word, he may be said to have been the main prop of my career and the greatest of my benefactors. Behind all my worldly prosperity stands Beames, that high-souled Britisher. I shall remember him

with gratitude till the last breath of my life. Even now, I twice pray to God every day, morning and evening, for the peace of his soul. I put it down here with much hesitation that Beames used to describe me, in those early days, to all his friends, as a 'patriotic pundit'."

THE LABOUR-BOY WRITES BOOKS

Not among a handful of foreigners alone, but throughout the entire Oriya-speaking people scattered in four contiguous provinces, young Fakirmohan slowly became known as a rising patriot, writer and scholar during those years of his headmastership of the Mission School at Balasore. Under his brilliant guidance and supervision, the school made a name for itself, winning the majority of State scholarships for its boys year after year. And what is more, the young headmaster, with only inchoate primary education to his credit and with the experiences of a work-boy, won covetable government rewards for his Oriya text-books on mathematics, geography, trigonometry and Indian history. It is this unexpected achievement of Fakirmohan in the world of books in his very maiden attempts that spread his fame beyond the limited borders of Balasore to all corners of the Oriya-speaking land. Like his literary products of later years, these text-books carried the impress of deep and wide study, excellent marshalling of facts and pleasant presentation.

HE THINKS OF HIS LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE

He was himself surprised at the success of his books. How could a labour-boy, with only one-and-a-half year's formal education to his credit, ever dream of being a writer? But his success as a school teacher, his enviable standing with the ruling British class as a noted scholar and public man, and his authorship of books on a variety of subjects, now studied in schools all over Orissa, brought him, as yet in his early twenties, to his nation's front line. With not much to work about money, Fakirmohan had now time enough to apply his mind to improving his people's adverse condition.

Apart from the economic and administrative disabilities under which the Oriyas suffered, Fakirmohan had daily to face

mockery from Bengalees for lack of suitable text-books in Oriya. And it was solely to wipe out this national insult that he had thought of writing text-books in Oriya. Thank God, the young patriot far exceeded his own expectations in his very maiden attempts. And emboldened with these fresh successes, the humble school teacher now turned to Oriya language and literature in general. Let us know the unimaginable evolution of a labour-boy into a national leader, in his own words :

"Whenever a new Bengali book came to my hands, I turned its pages backwards and forwards and looked around in listless despair. I instinctively started asking myself, when such a book would come out in my own language, Oriya ! A deep sigh of anguish would go out of my heart. The few English-or-Persian-knowing Oriyas that there were, thought it rather *infra dig* to even speak Oriya, or a snag rather, in their official careers. How could they be expected to waste their precious money on such rubbish as Oriya books? Hence I pondered day and night over the difficult problem of how to improve my undeveloped and neglected language. Deep underneath all my outward activities, was ceaselessly raging this sole passion in the inmost region of my soul. My one objective was to see books coming out in Oriya as it was happening in Bengali.

"But where are the writers after all in Orissa? Can I be an author? There being no Oriya journal, monthly or weekly, I used to send, at times, small articles to the Bengali *Somaprakash*. As the editor published them all, I developed a little sense of reassurance in my heart about my ever being a writer. In the meantime, I had tried my hand at some songs for *Krishna Lila* in my village and had felt much encouraged when I heard them being sung in public performances.

"I attempted now something big in prose. This was entitled 'The History of a Prince'. As friends appreciated it, I sent the manuscript to the Mission Press at Cuttack — the only printing press at that time in the whole of Orissa. But when I was informed that the printing would cost me Rs. 300, I felt awfully flabbergasted. That 'History of a Prince' completely evaporated therefore, in the consequential despair.

ORIYAS AND THE PRINTED WORD

"The common Oriya at that time could not even read prose, thoroughly accustomed as he was to enjoy literature through only poetry of rhetorical sonority in various metres and tunes. But there was not a single book even of that popular sort of classical Oriya poetry, in print. Some of us decided, therefore, that, in order to make Oriyas familiar with the printed word, we had better make easily available to them, first of all, well-known works of Oriya poetry in print at a cheap price and, to make that possible, there should be a printing press, solely devoted to this purpose. We should not depend on the mercies of the Cuttack Mission Press any longer."

SENAPATI'S PRINTING PRESS

And so young schoolmaster Senapati set about setting up the second printing press in Orissa, at Balasore. As he had no money of his own, he tried to set up a joint stock company, collecting subscriptions from sceptic minds and reluctant hands. The way he dared and accomplished this project is indeed a memorable saga. Rightly did Radhanath, the poet, publicly declared later on, that even the fact alone of Senapati's setting up a printing press at Balasore on cooperative lines would have immortalised his name in the history of modern Orissa.

It took twenty-two days for Senapati's press, carried in bullock carts, to reach Balasore from Calcutta. It became, however, a red-letter day for the whole of Balasore when it was announced that Senapati's printing-miracle would take place in broad day-light. The Collectorate was practically empty, the clerks having taken casual leave *en masse* to see the marvel with their own eyes. For many months subsequently, rich folk from distant villages came to Balasore in palanquins just to see how the printing machine worked. Six months after the press had successfully functioned, it was visited by dignitaries, like John Beames, and T. E. Ravenshaw, Commissioner of the Orissa Division, paralleling the visit of the British King and Queen to William Caxton's similar pioneering adventure at Westminster. Ravenshaw, after listening to Senapati's experiences, forthwith rewarded him with Rs. 10, which the latter

converted into a share. He paid back Ravenshaw Rs. 30, share and dividends combined, when the Company was wound up.

EDITOR OF JOURNALS

In his restless energy young Fakirmohan strongly reminds us of Benjamin Franklin. Not content with the grand achievement of having set up a successful printing press, nor with his well-deserved reputation as a teacher, headmaster and writer of books, he now brought out two journals, *Bodhadayini* and *Balasore Sambada Bahika,* the latter devoted to news and comments and the former to literature only. And he was their sole writer as well as printer, publisher, distributor and financier, all in one.

CHAPTER V

SAVES HIS NATION'S LANGUAGE

A BENGALI pundit, recruited direct from Bengal, and appointed in the newly established Government High School at Balasore, brought out a book to show that Oriya was not an independent language, arguing it out into the position of a mere dialect of Bengali, and pleading for its immediate abolition to make room for Bengali all over Orissa.

Describes Fakirmohan in throbbing, panicky sentences, the great crisis his language and people now faced :

"The Bengali headmaster of the Balasore Zilla School sent this book to the Inspector of Schools through the Bengali Deputy Inspector of Schools of Balasore, both strongly recommending Pandit Kantichandra Bhattacharya's thesis. At that time the whole of Orissa was part of one educational circle with headquarters at Midnapore. True, the Inspector of Schools was one R. L. Martin, an Englishman, but all officers under him were Bengali. Orders soon arrived from the Inspector of Schools at Midnapore to the effect that henceforth only Sanskrit and Bengali shall be studied at the Government High School at Balasore and no Oriya at all.

SENAPATI SPEARHEADS COUNTER-ATTACK

"We, the few educated Oriyas at Balasore, felt stunned and thunder-struck. We started whispering among ourselves in great panic : what has happened to us indeed? What to do now? Can't we any more study our own language on our own soil?

"I got my old group of friends alerted. We cudgelled our brains, day and night, for discovering ways and means of saving our mother-tongue. But the response was most frustrating.

When we collected the subordinate Oriya officials together and appealed to them for a concerted move, they unanimously replied : 'Look here, this is entirely a governmental affair. Our children shall study whatever the government prescribes for them. Shall we invite trouble onto ourselves by acting against the Government's decision?'

"Taking the cue from these officials, the few zamindars and rich folk among the Oriyas refused also to listen to us. They would say, 'Do you want us to be penalised by government for dabbling in a matter which even all-powerful officials dare not challenge?' "

But undaunted by such disappointing experiences, the young but resourceful headmaster of the Mission School went on trying one device after another. He once again collected the Oriya officials and made a clever and characteristic speech as follows, touching on their most sensitive economic chords :

"Dear sirs, please know that substitution of Bengali in place of Oriya is no governmental decision at all. It is entirely a Bengali conspiracy. They have been able to do it by just hoodwinking the British Inspector of Schools. But please know that emboldened with their success at schools, they will soon abolish Oriya from courts and offices also. And don't you realise the reason behind such moves? You all know Persian, the old official language, very well. But Persian was abolished just to make room for the English-knowing Bengalis. That is how they have come to occupy all the big jobs under government in Orissa. Your knowledge of Persian, laboriously acquired in childhood, has come to nothing. And now, if Oriya is abolished, establishing Bengali in its place, all jobs in Orissa shall perpetually be in possession of the Bengalis, generation after generation. You might also be discharged *en masse* at no distant date to make room for fresh hordes of Bengalis from Calcutta. And the prospects for your children and grand-children is nothing but bleak darkness."

"These few sentences of mine", writes Fakirmohan, "created a hub-bub in the whole assembly at once. They all now cried out together, 'No, no, that can't be. Our children must study Oriya at schools. Tell us what to do and we shall do it all at

once !'

"I replied : 'To petition to the government, is the easiest way out. That will surely re-establish Oriya in our schools. And that will prevent Bengalis getting all jobs in future'. All cried out, 'Prepare the petition at once'.

"A petition was drafted with care and signatures were collected. This was submitted to the District Collector. At that time, to the good fortune of the Oriyas, all the British officials and the English Christian Missionaries were in our favour. They all now supported our counter-move. When this mass petition came up before the great scholar of linguistics, John Beames, District Magistrate of Balasore, he sent it up to T. E. Ravenshaw, Commissioner of the Orissa Division, with a strong recommendation. Beames even went to the extent of publishing a brochure to prove the independence and antiquity of the Oriya language, advocating adequate measures for its proper development, and sent a copy of it to the Government of Bengal to strengthen his official recommendation.

"T. E. Ravenshaw, the great well-wisher of Orissa and the Oriyas, sent a strong note in favour of Oriya to Government. And soon enough Government orders came to the effect that not only Bengali should be abolished from all schools in Orissa but that all over Orissa new schools should be established with a view to developing the Oriya language.

"Orissa should, therefore, ever remember with gratitude the two great-souled Britishers,, Beames, the District Magistrate, and Ravenshaw, the Commissioner."

Chapter VI

RESOURCEFUL ADMINISTRATOR

After about a decade's successful school-mastering at Balasore, young Fakirmohan had almost decided to accept pedagogy as his sole vocation for life. But so far he had been working in private institutions only. The education department of the government did certainly offer higher salaries, a greater sense of security, and larger opportunities for promotion. And unsought by him, that opportunity one day came to our young schoolmaster's doorsteps. The job of Second Pundit at the Normal (Teachers' Training) School at Cuttack, Orissa's intellectual as well as administrative headquarters, fell vacant and Mr. R. L. Martin, Inspector of Schools, straightway offered it to the already distinguished headmaster of the Mission School at Balasore. The salary was highly tempting, being three times what Senapati was drawing, apart from other advantages. Naturally enough, he decided to accept the proffered job at Cuttack. But when he talked about it to Rev. E. C. B. Hallam, he at once raised Senapati's salary to what he was expecting from his new job at Cuttack, with an appeal not to desert the school he had built up. Fakirmohan, therefore, stayed on where he was.

BEAMES' OFFER

When his cherished entry into government employment failed to materialise, for no fault of his, destiny, however, opened out fresh vistas, perhaps more colourful than the routine world of pedagogy could ever have provided.

Till 25 years ago, Orissa was a land of rajas, maharajas and zaminders. Nilgiri was a small princely state adjacent

to the district of Balasore, with which it has been merged after the abolition of the princely order in post-independent India. When it needed a new Dewan, Mr. John Beames, offered the post to young Fakirmohan. That was perhaps the measure of the deep impact the school teacher and press-company-founder had made on the local British officers. He accepted Beames' offer without hesitation, and who wouldn't, even to-day?

Fakirmohan joined as Dewan of Nilgiri State in 1871, at the young age of 28. Henceforth, he went on working as Dewan or Assistant Dewan, Manager or Assistant Manager, in various other States and Estates of Orissa, such as, Dompada, Dhenkanal, Daspalla, Pal-lahada, Keonjhar and Kendrapara, retiring in 1892 after more than a quarter-century of varied experiences in the administrative field. And it is these jobs that provided him with points of vantage from where he could observe men, women and their mutual contacts and conflicts in a far wider arena than he could have ever done as a school-master. And it is these observations that later filled his stories and novels, making them so vibrant with life. Thus, if John Beames' pregnant offer of Dewanship had not come his way, Senapati might have passed away as merely a second-rate Oriya enthusiast in a district town, and Oriya literature might never have possessed the unique contributions from the pen of this man.

A MODERNISER

Wherever posted as Dewan, Manager, etc., Fakirmohan tried to bring in innovations. It may surprise many readers that nearly a century ago this young Dewan of the Nilgiri state in Orissa had plans to grow tea on commercial lines. He was the first also to set up a regular market-place, a Sanskrit school, the beginnings of an English school system, roads connecting Nilgiri to the outer world and extensive coconut plantations. Wherever he was posted, he laid out a prosperous, well-trimmed garden of his own, introducing western flowers and vegetables among the local people. And what he loved most in his garden was the rose-corner, always containing rare and choice varieties collected from distant places. He was so overjoyed with the delicate nocturnal frag-

rance of the blossoms of *husna hena*, freshly imported to India that time from Japan, that he has left behind an entire poem of panegyrics to this exotic beauty from accross the seas. He has recorded also the first acquaintance of Orissa villagers with western vegetables, such as, cabbages and cauliflowers. At Daspalla he distributed cabbages raised in his own garden to a few village headmen (*padhans*). When he met those *padhans* some time later, he enquired of them as to how they liked his vegetarian gifts. But the unanimous reply was, "*Hazur*, our womenfolk did give the strange stuff a good enough broil in steaming hot sour *kanji*, but it refused to shed that mouldy stench, you know!"

A large portion of Senapati's autobiography is devoted to his exciting experiences as Dewan or Manager, narrated in inimitably simple and yet colourful language. Lest some detractors might take all those descriptions as his unfounded bravado, here is an unbiassed British officer's testimony to his efficiency as an administrator.

Says no less an authority than T. E. Ravenshaw, Commissioner of Orissa Division, in his annual report for 1873 to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal :

"The mission school (at Balasore) was conducted by one of the best specimens of an Oooriah, I have ever seen, Baboo Fakeer Mohun Senapaty. He has, however, left it for the better post of Dewan to the Rajah of Neelghery, in which capacity, I am glad to see, he is carrying out improvements and introducing principles of honesty and justice... This is one out of many instances of the vast amount of indirect good done by that excellent man whose loss we all deeply deplore".

UNCONSCIOUS DISCIPLE OF MACHIAVELLI

As we look back, we find that completely unaware of what Machiavelli had advised rulers to follow in his *Prince*, Fakirmohan, the pragmatic administrator, had followed that Italian statesman and litterateur's wise counsels, in his double role of fatherly benefactor to the tyrannised tenantry and of the hard-headed, unscrupulous manipulator, while solving knotty administrative problems. And of the so-called Machiavellian

aspect of his personality, this able administrator makes no secret.

Long before Gandhi made the concept of non-co-operation world-famous, it was a socio-political practice throughout Orissa, and still is, in remote rural corners, where communities exist in unsophisticated pre-modern conditions. And nearly a century back, Fakirmohan tackled the non-co-operation or passive resistance of a bunch of Orissan peasantry exactly as the thoroughbred British imperialists did the Gandhian mass movement in the twenties of this century.

PROBLEMS OF DOMPADA

Dompada was a small Estate in the district of Cuttack in which it is now merged. When Fakirmohan went there as Dewan, there was a new *raja*, educated in Calcutta. The young squire naturally preferred the pleasures of urban life to the unexciting, drab existence in his jungle-capital. He, therefore, spent most of his time in Cuttack, Calcutta or other Indian cities, leaving his ancestral palace as well as its denizens, including the Rani, in utter neglect. All that he cherished was more and more funds at his disposal for unstinted expenditure in cities. And for this, he proposed a fresh land-settlement in his Estate which meant increase of the old rentals.

But who wants to pay taxes ? No wonder, even the illiterate peasantry of Dompada stoutly resisted the proposal of a new settlement. Many farmers also were in unauthorised occupation of lands for which they did not pay even a penny. They apprehended that a fresh settlement meant fixation of rent on these lands. The Brahmins and the village headmen (*padhans*) also were among the privileged defaulters. And it is they who incited the simple, illiterate tenantry to stage a mass revolt to safeguard their own illegal privileges. And the *raja* proving uncompromising, the people not only stopped paying rents and taxes, but imposed also a social boycott on the Raja's family and his rent-collectors.

When Fakirmohan, then a young man of 33, arrived on the scene, the Raja's palace was in utter disrepair, jungle encroaching upon it on all sides. The Raja was mostly an

absentee, living on loans, and his harem had petitioned the District Magistrate of Cuttack for bare alimony. Mr. John Beames, now the Magistrate of the District of Cuttack, sent Fakirmohan to this trouble-spot with the hope that this clever and reputed man might be able to bring about a rapprochement between the landlord and his rebellious tenants. He was already disgusted with the mutually recriminating petitions from both sides.

NON-COOPERATION, AN OLD ORISSAN PRACTICE

And as Fakirmohan made efforts at a settlement, the dying embers flamed out. The resisters, guided by no less a leader than an ex-Dewan, a local well-to-do landowner, set up a sort of parallel administration. They issued firmans to every village and all sections of people to stop forthwith all social and business contacts with the palace. This scared away even the palace servants. As the local washerman refused to wash palace clothes, this had to be done at distant Cuttack. Fisherfolk, water-carriers and milkmen also stopped their traditional services to the Establishment.

Young Fakirmohan, with the best of intentions for both sides, found himself distrusted by both. The Raja suspected him to be Magistrate's man and the tenants took him to be the Raja's. It was a most unenviable situation for any administrative head.

In December, 1876 Mr. Beames visited Dompada for an on-the-spot investigation. On Fakirmohan's pleadings he had agreed for a fresh settlement, but not to any increase in the rentals. The Raja was however, obdurate for both. He was already taken in government circles as crazy, and, a quick compromise between him and his tenants failing, he was on the point of losing the Estate altogether. But it was Senapati's ardent desire that, at least during his Dewanship, he should not see an ancient noble house of Orissa, like that of Dompada, go to extinction that way.

The English District Magistrate of those days, out on a tour of the interior villages, had a retinue of over one hundred persons. Even in the midst of strict socio-economic sanctions

against the Establishment, it was the obligation of the Dewan to keep them all in good humour, with sumptuous hospitality. Fakirmohan had, therefore, got all the necessities, down to vegetables, brought all the way from Cuttack, a distance of nearly 50 miles. But to add to his troubles, it had started raining, intensifying the cold and disrupting communications. The boycotting population and the Estate servants kept indoors, leaving the young Dewan moving up and down in mud and storm, supervising every detail for the District Magistrate's reception.

Behind all these goings-on, the diplomatic Dewan was busy using all sorts of subterfuges to break through the tenants' resistance and win over at least a section of them to the Raja's side. And he thought he had succeeded at last, to be sorely disillusioned very soon. All village headmen and leading tenants had been summoned to meet the District Magistrate at his camp at 4 P.M. one day, and the young Dewan had spent that entire morning strenuously instructing a group of supposedly won-over tenants as to what they should say to the *sahib*, when questioned.

By 4 P.M., it was still raining heavily, with a minor blizzard. The scholarly Beames was perhaps spending his dreary hours in the primitive conditions of an Orissan jungle-village with his favourite linguistic studies. He was certainly in no mood to listen to boring, interminable arguments and counter-arguments from the two groups. He had covered himself from head to foot with a blanket when he came out to meet Fakirmohan and the tenants.

On the orders of the Magistrate, the *chaprasi* called out for the village headmen. They streamed out from their different shelters and lined up before the Magistrate's tent. But Fakirmohan did not find in the assembly even a single one of those whom he had so carefully tutored that whole morning; they were probably physically detained somewhere by the rebel ring-leaders.

But Beames, impatient to go back to the warmth of his tent and his linguistic studies, blurted out in Hindi, "Well, tenants of Dompada, do you wish that Fakirmohan Babu shall

arbitrate over all your disputes with the Raja?" A bunch of leading village headmen immediately shouted back together, "If the Dewan was to settle our disputes, what for did *you* come here in this inclement weather, all this long way from Cuttack?"

Scholar though he was in eastern Indian languages, including Oriya, it was difficult for Beames to catch exactly what the *padhans* shouted in their local intonation. He looked at Fakirmohan, his old teacher in Oriya, asking, "What do they say?"

And it took no time for his quick-witted former teacher to reply, "They say, *Dewan* Babu is good enough to solve all our problems. Your Honour had really no need to go through all this trouble."

Pleased with Fakirmohan's interpretation, Beames spoke out his valedictory sentences, "Very good. The new Dewan will look into everything. He is a very able man and I have great confidence in him. Farewell, tenants, farewell."

This naturally enough, caused a great frustration among themselves, "What's happened after all? What did the *sahib* understand of our situation?" But the tables were already turned. And here was a new Fakirmohan, altogether different from scholarly and successful schoolmaster. Here was an unusually resourceful administrator. Fortified with the Magistrate's orders, he immediately asked his constables to drive away the disgruntled headmen and their followers, so that they could not reopen discussions with the *sahib*. And so it happened.

But because of the foul weather, Beames' return to Cuttack was delayed. He moved to other villages of the Estate. And this unexpectedly prolonged the crisis for the young Dewan. The rations brought from Cuttack for the Magistrate and his large retinue were already exhausted. Everything had now to be collected from local sources. The Dewan had first to order the milkmen to supply milk and ghee next morning. But they were not to be seen anywhere. At last, late that morning, a milkman presented himself with some meagre amounts of ghee and milk. Not far from where

Beames was camping, Fakirmohan was sitting on a peasant's verandah. The sight of this deliberately late-arriving milkman drove him into a wild frenzy of anger. It was still drizzling. The village street was muddy. There was log of uncut timber lying on the street mud. Fakirmohan immediately ordered two constables to bind the cowherd to the log and, while one poured the milk and ghee over him, another rained down cane-strokes till ordered to stop.

When this operation was in full swing, a whole host of the penalised cowherd's companions rushed out from nowhere and all of them, now prostrate at full length before Fakirmohan on the slush, cried out in one voice, "Save us, your Holiness and Personification-of-Justice. Pray, unbind our brother, please. We shall supply forthwith all the milk and ghee Your Honour has requisitioned."

And actually, what reasonable persuasion had failed to effect, the harsh rod did. Within half-an-hour or so, man-loads of ghee and milk arrived for the *sahib* and his retinue, followed by fish and other provisions in unexpected abundance. It was an instant and smashing break-through of the non-co-operation, passive resistance and no-rent compaigns, with one bold stroke. Dewan Fakirmohan had cut the Gordian knot.

Nothing succeeds like success. And much emboldened by these first signs of turning of the tide, Fakirmohan filed before Beames some criminal cases against the leading headmen, including a cousin of the ex-Dewan, Dayanidhi Pattanayak, the master-mind behind the so-called peoples' agitation. At that time he came to know that the headmen were making a last-minute desperate effort to present their grievances before the *sahib* again, and were streaming out from villages in a long procession to where he was camping. Quick-witted Fakirmohan forthwith sent a possee of constables with warrants of arrest against all those involved in the criminal cases. As the mob was crossing the dry bed of a river, Senapati's gendarmerie quickly spotted out and hand-cuffed the wanted men. This had an electrical effect. The demoralised crowd ran backwards helter-skelter as though for

very life. And that was the end of the resistance movement.

There was peace now in Dompada. Affairs got back to normalcy. And Fakirmohan started the settlement operations. The Raja was now a happy man. He was eager to keep Fakirmohan as his Dewan for life and give him a fat pension when he retired. He even came up with these proposals before the Commissioner. But that well-meaning British officer advised Fakirmohan not to run away with the Raja's words, but to honour instead the government's orders appointing him as Assistant Manager of the Native State of Dhenkanal, then under the management of the Court of Wards, a welcome rise in status and emoluments.

So Fakirmohan left Dompada with flying colours, solving a vexatious problem involving a Raja and his subjects, with dignity and fairness to all concerned. It speaks volumes about his magnanimity and transparent humanism that before he left he gave compensation to the ex-Dewan Dayanidhi Pattanayak and others, who had master-minded the peasant revolt, because he thought he had been harsh to them in the process of bringing about a settlement.

CHAPTER VII

THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF A MILITIA

KEONJHAR is now a district of Orissa State. But formerly it was a State by itself, ruled by the Bhanjas, the celebrated ruling clan to which belonged Upendra Bhanja, the greatest of Orissa's medieval poets. The Bhanjas of Keonjhar, a branch of the celebrated House of Bhanjas of Mayurbhanj, have made significant contributions to Orissa's literature and culture.

When Fakirmohan joined Keonjhar State Service as Manager in 1887, he was just forty-five, in full tide of his manly vigour and enthusiasm. His princely master was Maharaja Dhananjoy Bhanja, an educated and capable man. The irrigation projects he implemented still stand as memorials of his administrative efficiency as well as benevolent attitude towards his subjects.

KING-MAKING BHUYANS

Keonjhar is the home-land of the Bhuyan tribe. Dhananjoy Narayan Bhanja was progressive enough to send a young Bhuyan, Dharanidhar by name, to Cuttack to be trained in cadastral survey, at state expense. On completion of his training, he was appointed as a probationary surveyor.

In practically all the principalities in Orissa, the notorious system of compulsory unpaid labour was in vogue. Each family was to contribute its own quota of labour to the State for a certain number of days in the year. The poor working classes were the hardest hit. Generally aged male members of the family volunteered for free labour, leaving the youth to look after the family's meagre acres. These elderly husbandmen had to carry their own rations as well as the work-tools, cook their

own meals at the end of a full day of back-breaking labour, and sleep in the open in the wilderness.

The Bhuyans were subjected to such inhuman conscription like all other classes of people in the State. The Brahmins, the well-to-do husbandmen and officials, however, were exempt. One Bichitrananda Das, Assistant Manager of Keonjhar, engaged only Bhuyans in a minor river dam project and was particularly harsh to them. Freely using his whip, he often forced them to work on empty stomachs. The Bhuyans, a highly sensitive people, were silently simmering with rage, waiting only for a leader to jump in for a war of vengeance. That leadership came handy in the Cuttack-educated young Dharanidhar.

The Bhuyans have the race-memory that the whole State was once theirs, and that they had been unfairly pushed into the unproductive hilly hinterlands by the Hindus. In olden times, Keonjhar formed part of the neighbouring State of Mayurbhanj. But the capital was so far away that the Bhuyans found it difficult to travel all that distance to display their loyalty to the Chief. So, they once kidnapped a young prince of the house of Mayurbhanj and made him their Raja. But a Raja must ride a horse or an elephant, which the Bhuyans did not possess. So, one of the Bhuyan headmen walked on all fours as a make-shift royal charger or elephant, and the young Raja was made to ride on his back, thus symbolically proclaiming his sovereign power. Then another Bhuyan chief lay prostrate before the young Raja, who was made to touch his neck with his sword, signifying that the tribe delegated to him the power to punish the erring Bhuyans as he considered appropriate. At the coronation ceremony of every new Raja of Keonjhar these symbolic rites are still observed. This naturally put the idea into simple Bhuyan heads that the making or unmaking of a Raja in Keonjhar was entirely their right as well as responsibility and nobody should have the cheek to tyrannise over them on their own soil.

THE PRETENDER

Dharanidhar, the young Bhuyan, had imbibed patriotic and

progressive ideas while at Cuttack. While helping the State authorities in a border dispute with the neighbouring British district of Singhbhum, he was stunned to know that his brother Gopal and some other close relations had been arrested and imprisoned by the Raja. He immediately left his job and, fleeing into tribal areas, incited his compatriots into a wild frenzy of revolt against the Establishment. He now publicised himself as the 'adopted son of the Maharani' and issued signed fiats under that designation. Several hundred tribals gathered round him, ready for action with bows and arrows. Attacking the Raja's outlying barns and police-posts, the rebels gathered a few fire-arms as well as enough of food-stuff to keep them going in their jungle hideouts for quite a long time.

Fakirmohan was running the affairs of Keonjhar, not from Keonjhargarh, where the Maharaja stayed in his palace, but from Anandapur, the State's second big town from where flowed all the State's economic prosperity. As soon as rumours and alarums of the Bhuyan revolt came to his ears, he kept several runners on the road between Keonjhargarh and Anandapur round the clock, to keep himself abreast of the latest moves of the rebels. But on the third night after the start of the revolt, he was stunned to find the Maharaja with his large retinue fleeing to Cuttack, leaving his women-folk unprotected in his deserted palace.

Fakirmohan first called up the State's militia in order to tackle the rebel hordes, and then took the shaky Maharaja down to Cuttack, where he made strenuous efforts to secure military assistance. Succeeding in his efforts to a large extent, Fakirmohan returned to Anandapur with the Maharaja. By this time the State militia had assembled at Anandapur. With the Maharaja on an elephant making the vanguard and Fakirmohan on another at the rear, the primitive army proceeded towards the capital, moving through devious jungle routes under cover of night to avoid being ambushed by tribal guerilla bands.

THE ARMY OF RAGAMUFFINS

At the second night halt, news reached that the rebels had seized the palace. The panicky Maharaja fled to Cuttack again,

but not before his level-headed Manager had secured from him an authorisation to kill the Bhuyans in self-defence or for protecting the property and honour of the deserted womenfolk at the palace.

Senapati ('General') Fakirmohan, true to his family-name and tradition, now marched at the head of the militia as its commanding officer. With this unusual and unexpected military responsibility on his shoulders, he had the soldiers paraded in right modern style at every stoppage and personally inspected their arms. The whole show, however, was a mental shock to him, though he never gave vent to it. The soldiers were mostly old people, whose grandfathers perhaps had known some real action at the time of the Marathas. But during more than a century under Pax Britannica, their swords had undisturbed rest in the scabbards, and their native matchlocks were rusting with disuse. Their guns had not even been freshly tested before they left their distant village-homes in hurry for this unexpected expedition, and most of them complained that they had little time even to prepare and carry the necessary amount of gun-powder.

Undaunted, however, by such distressing revelations, Fakirmohan courageously led his army of ragamuffins, among whom, of course, were a few swashbucklers who, in spite of all the handicaps, bravely swirled their rusty blades before their 'General', declaring that they would surely decimate the entire tribe of Bhuyans. Keen-eyed Fakirmohan always enjoyed these usual little bravados and vanities of man, and these observations made his stories and novels, written much later, so fascinating.

TACTICAL SURRENDER

As he was nearing the capital, Fakirmohan had information that the Bhuyans had not actually laid siege to the palace, but were massing near the village Raisuan in the hills just beyond the capital, soon to swoop down. In order to forestall the rebels in their evil designs, he made a *tour de force* to meet them in their hideouts and finish them there. He sent out scouts to ascertain their dispositions and numerical strength.

But they betrayed him. Crediting their false accounts, he proceeded unwittingly direct into a rebel encampment. While he and his troops were crossing the Raisuan pass, the hills on both sides reverberated with gun-shots. In the clear morning light he saw the rebels with bows and arrows or country guns, stalking behind bushes and trees. And as he was deciding what his next move could be, an arrow almost grazed his neck. His head remained on his shoulders just by a hair's breadth. Quickly sizing up the enemy's superiority in numbers as well as its strategically advantageous position on hill-slopes, he wisely took discretion to be the better part of valour and, in his desire to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, surrendered.

THE BATTLE OF WITS

But giving up the battle of arms as the most logical step in the circumstances, shrewd Fakirmohan soon started a battle of wits, completely knocking the enemy out in the process. The captured Manager was now taken before young Dharanidhar, the pretender to the throne of Keonjhar. He knew the young surveyor very well as his erstwhile subordinate. But he fully adjusted himself to the new situation and unabashedly declared that he was no more than a mere bread-winner of his family and that he would be happy to serve as the new 'Maharaja's' Dewan.

Young Dharanidhar declared to his assembled followers that he certainly could not rule such a vast state singlehanded and that he must be assisted by able officials. And here was an experienced Manager who knew all the details of administration. Why not have him from now ? The Bhuyans, generally suspicious of all officials, acquiesed in their leader's proposal with deep mental reservations. Not that Fakirmohan was not fully aware of it. He, therefore, tried to win over their confidence by a series of deliberate stalking-horse antics and successfully kept them off their planned assaults on the Maharaja's palace by his extraordinary qualities as a raconteur. He made them put off their expedition by his suggestions of better strategy and modern weaponry which would blow up the whole palace in a trice. Why risk a war with bows and

arrows, causing unnecessary loss of life? The tribals were kept waiting for dynamite to be obtained from Calcutta.

Young Dharanidhar was addicted to betel-chewing as was Fakirmohan himself. This drew them all the closer to each other. On a pretext of requisitioning more betel-leaves, Fakirmohan sent a cryptic message to the Maharaja, suggesting speedy military action. This letter, dated May 16, 1891, was addressed to one Bholanath, a supposed major-domo of Fakirmohan, but actually a State Official, and duly censored by Dharanidhar, it ran as follows :

"This is for my agent Bholanath's information. As most urgently needed by the Maharani's son, please somehow send at least 100 betels and two hundred arecanuts. For irrigating my sugarcane field, dig a ditch from the north side, otherwise the canes may soon wither out."

The epistle was twined with three bits of wire. Fortunately for all, the authorities could correctly decipher Senapati's code-message, taking betel leaves for soldiers and arecanuts as guns. The significance of the wires also was correctly understood as communicating to different authorities the serious situation in the state by telegram and requesting adequate military help. All this was quickly done, and one fine morning, not long after, young pretender Dharanidhar with his cohorts was captured by the troops in a sudden swoop on his hideout. Sentenced to long years of rigorous imprionment, Young Bhuyan Dharanidhar's dream of being the Maharaja of Keonjhar was shattered for ever.

CHAPTER VIII

PURGATORY OF A HOME AND PARADISE OF A SECOND WIFE

THE inner life of Fakirmohan, whose outer one was so full of melodrama, was often a hot and dreary desert. The ebullient genius was utterly lonely, as a man. This loneliness was blissfully relieved, however, for some time only, by the lovely fragrance of two rare flowers of womanhood. But by the time the unexpected creative activities of that genius had just crossed the initial stages, those two rare angels had left this world, leaving him a grieving and isolated spirit again.

It is significant that this man, who had enough cause to be thoroughly cynical about life and pass his days in moping despondence, was a live-wire protagonist of good living, never losing sight of or underestimating the silver lining in the dark clouds he ever met on his horizon, laughing heartily over the incongruities of the human animal and making others share that rare pleasure. This excellent balance in his personality and his benevolent way of looking at the notorious world of ours, in spite of abundant personal sufferings, were possible only for the tremendous impact which two illiterate or semi-literate women brought to bear on his delicate sensitivities through unstinted love and devotion, which only women are capable of.

MARITAL BLESSEDNESS

The two angels behind Fakirmohan were Kuchila Dei, his grandmother, and Krushna Kumari, his second wife.

An arranged marriage had been forced on him at the absurd age of thirteen, and that too with a lady who, along

with his heartless aunt, both living under the same roof, made his days and nights just unbearable, during his early years at Balasore. Says the poor, miserable husband :

"I married Lilavati Devi, daughter of Narayan Parida, a resident of the Manika Khamba area of the town of Balasore. She was with me till I was twenty-nine years of age. She was heartless, arrogant, harsh of speech, delighting, above all, in always doing the opposite of what I desired. This marital union was far more agonising to me than all the prolonged and painful illness from which I suffered in my earlier years. All through those years of terrible mental suffering I was ever reminded of the well-known gnomic quatrain in Sanskrit :

He, who hasn't a loving mother at home,
But a nagging spouse, to boot,
Had better repair to wilderness,
As home and wilderness are just the same to him.

"At that time, my sole source of peace was my grandma. After her passing away, this so-called 'home' of mine became just a purgatory. My first wife, however, became a victim to a serious disease. After a year-long treatment, it was declared incurable. For a last try, her parents took her to their home where she ultimately expired. I was then at Puri."

THE FLINT-HEARTED AUNT

In addition to the agonies of a wrong wife, young Fakirmohan had been living under the other daily hell-fire of a cruel, unsympathetic aunt, as we already know. These two women drove young Fakirmohan almost crazy. It speaks volumes for the in-born heroism and marvellous vitality of this man, that living in the midst of this hell of a home, he was so successful in all fronts in the outside world as head of a school, as a writer and scholar and, above all, the brave leader of his community.

Sagacious Fakirmohan might not have contracted a second marriage after such harrowing personal experiences of a wife and an aunt. But after the death of his first wife, social wiseacres started dinning into his ears the undesirability of a Hindu male leaving no male successor behind, thus deliberately cutting

off the ancestral continuity, the spiritual link with the forbears. Orphaned Fakirmohan was devoutly worshipful of the memory of his parents, though he had never known them. So, it was more as an act of piety for appeasing those departed souls, rather as an expectation of happiness, that Fakirmohan soon yielded to the persuasion of his well-wishers to marry again.

AN ANGEL CROSSES HIS DESERT

And this too was an arranged marriage, negotiated mainly by a female relation. The wife-to-be was only twelve years old, less than half her future husband's age. But ironically enough, it was the semi-literate child second-wife, Krushna Kumari, who filled the life of a genius with the only blessedness that he was destined to know in all his long life, reminding us of Charlie Chaplin's idyllic happiness with Oona, his fourth wife, proving to the hilt the common belief that marriages are made in heaven and that marital happiness is beyond human disposition.

And Krushna Kumari turned out to be the harbinger of her husband's worldly prosperity also. For, it was very soon after marrying her that Fakirmohan, as already described, was offered the Dewanship of Nilgiri State, a big and unusual jump for a schoolmaster.

Fakirmohan and Krushna Kumari lived as husband and wife for about twenty-five years. And when this simple, semi-literate woman left this world, she not only plunged her genius-husband into unrelieved sorrow for another quarter of a century till his very last breath, but made also a whole national literature moist with her holy memory through her great husband's tears.

HIS ADORED GRANDMA

Readers already know what his grandmother was to sickly and orphaned Fakirmohan, entrusted, as a matter of social convention, to a pair of heartless uncle and aunt. It is gratifying to know that the doting old lady saw her sacrifices amply rewarded, in the unexpected celebrity her darling grandchild had achieved long before she died.

As a fitting memorial to this simple and noble lady, her grateful grandson has left a long poem dedicated to her, apart from other soulful tributes scattered over his stories and novels in his admirable literary images of self-abnegating and benevolent old ladies, radiating blessedness to all and sundry.

Chapter IX

THE GREAT TRIO

In the sixties of the last century, three budding intellectuals met at Balasore and became life-long friends. And each of them ushered in fresh trends in Oriya literature. Of these, Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao had had excellent English education at the university. Sons of Government employees, they were also well-placed in the education department of the government. They both retired as high officers with sizable pensions.

The third member of the trio was our Fakirmohan with not even a good primary education to his credit and no secure job either. Life to him was a prolonged battle for existence. But, strange as anomalies of genius often are, it was this least educated of the three, with little or no patrimony and no worthwhile social or academic background, who shines as the most modern of them all, with spiritual and intellectual adventures that the other two could not even entertain in their wildest aspirations.

1872 is a very significant year in Oriya literature. For, in that year Radhanath and Madhusudan together brought out a slender anthology of modern lyrics, under the title *Kabitabali* ('Poems'), with a view to meeting the urgent need of Oriya readers in the modern-type schools started by the British Government. This collection, the veritable *Lyrical Ballads* in the Oriya language, ushered in a real New Age in its long poetic tradition. It is significant that the two university-educated friends of Fakirmohan did not take him into their confidence in that cooperative poetic venture, because till then he was not considered even a poetaster, although he was already 30 years of age.

The fact is, if there was ever an unplanned genius in the whole world of letters, it was surely Fakirmohan Senapati. He was nothing, if not a brilliant pragmatist. His exceptional talents, slumbering deep in the subconscious layer of his psyche, woke up and reacted with unusual energy to unexpected situations. We have seen how the semi-schooled labour-boy emerged as a brilliant teacher, linguistic scholar, able administrator and natural leader of his people. Now we see him emerge as a poet of vast dimensions, deservedly earning the enviable and unusual epithet of *Vyasa Kavi* or 'Cosmopolitan Poet'. Although his valuable gifts to his language are his unique novels and stories which he produced late in life, he is still talked about in Orissa as the *Vyasa Kavi.* For the unusual facundity of this genius, throwing out all manners of literary products in easy abundance, the enlightened Durbar of Bamra honoured him also with the enviable literary title of *Saraswati.* And his emergence as a poet-cum-transcreator-and novelist of impressive dimensions was no more than a mere pragmatic reaction to unthought-of situations, like that labour-boy's excellent show-off as a teacher, as the champion of national causes and as an administrator.

During the whole of the decade preceding 1872, Fakirmohan had just two books to his credit in Oriya prose : an Oriya translation of Iswarachandra Vidyasagara's Bengali *Jibana Charita* ('Lives') and a *History of India*, to which, into his own words, "he had devoted much labour for over three years" and which, deservedly enough, remained a text-book in Orissa schools for years.

THE TRANSCREATOR

About another decade had to pass before we see Senapati again as a writer. Leaving the peace and security of schoolmastering at Balasore, he was now shifting from place to place as a busy civil servant, syncopated by long spells of unemployment and financial helplessness, followed by offers of unthought-of good jobs.

It was when Senapati was the Assistant Manager of Dhenkanal State that he lost his first child, a son by his dear

second wife, Krushna Kumari. The child, as Fakirmohan says, drew out the sentiments of both the parents, first, because it was a boy and, secondly, because it possessed handsome features. Fakirmohan had only a daughter by his first wife. His first male child's premature death became, therefore, particularly agonising to the loving parents, for it had completely possessed their souls for over six months by its charming infantile antics. This left the young mother Krushna Kumari prostrate with grief, though it was no less agonising to the father. It was as an anodyne to his dear wife's first experience of bereavement, that Fakirmohan, the busy bureaucrat, ventured to being a poet in the quiet inner world of his home.

Fortunately for Fakirmohan, Krushna Kumari was a lady with a pious and religious complex in her character. The unswerving dedication with which this almost illiterate woman blessed her genius-husband for over two decades, stemmed mainly from the bedrock of religiosity in her mental make-up.

There is perhaps no nobler description of poignant parental-filial relationship than in the *Ramayana*. Millions of bereaved parents find spiritual consolation in the hot, repentant tears of old king Dasaratha, for his dear exiled Rama, succumbing at least to unbearable grief soon afterwards. As a good enough measure of diverting sorrowing Krushna Kumari's mind, Fakirmohan asked a Brahmin priest to daily recite Balarama Dasa's Oriya *Ramayana* to her. Due, may be, to the rapid sing-song manner of the Brahmin's recital, much sense of what was being recited was lost to the poor grieving Krushna Kumari. Hence that arrangement was given up and Fakirmohan took now the bold step of daily translating Valmiki's original Sanskrit *Ramayana* into simple Oriya verse and personally reciting the portion done in the day to his wife in the evening. And this worked exceedingly well. Fakirmohan's each simple couplet was clarity itself. Everything was plain enough to even the semi-literate Krushna Kumari. It was really in the fitness of things that this great litterateur, who represents almost the first voice of the common man in modern Indian literature, should find his first appreciative listener and critic in his simple and almost unlettered wife.

As Fakirmohan went on from chapter to chapter and episode to episode of the *Ramayana*, he found Krushna Kumari sitting in statuesque silence, intently hanging on the lips of her great husband. Throughout the episode of Rama's exile, streams of tears flowed out of her eyes. When Fakirmohan's translation of the First Book of the *Ramayana* came out of the press, Krushna Kumari, says Fakirmohan, spoke thus in tears, with a copy lovingly held in her hand : "Why should we grieve any more for the lost child? Don't people want children just to see their memories perpetuated in this world? But all memorials last for only a short time whereas, I am sure, this child (the book) of ours shall perpetuate our names for ever!"

Encouraged by his unusually appreciative wife, Fakirmohan soon finished translating the entire *Ramayana*. And after the *Ramayana*, he took up the *Mahabbharata* also, again for her sake. By the last decade of the last century, he had finished this stupendous labour.

Because of their very workmanship, Fakirmohan's translation of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabbharata* got unstinted praise from all parts of Orissa. Although there were already several Oriya versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabbharata* in Oriya, such simple, faithful and readable translations were not available. Fakirmohan's were the first successful products in the line, fulfilling the needs, not of one grieving lady only, but of an entire nation.

To meet further that nation's most urgent spiritual needs, Fakirmohan took upon himself the verse-translations of all the important *Upanishads* also into Oriya, — the first ever to be attempted. The complex metaphysics of the Vedantas have been so placed in simple dexterity that Fakirmohan's translation of these *Upanishads* may be taken to be what is now described as transcreation.

The translation of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabbharata* and the important *Upanishads*, is an amazing performance by itself, for one man. When that man was a busy civil servant, tackling unusual administrative situations and machinations of hostile forces, that surprise might leave the reader stunned.

And such amazing feats of mental and physical labour are perhaps impossible in any man, unless inspired by some noble motive. Fakirmohan is the most inspired as well as the most extensive verse-translator in Oriya. The unconscious inspiration was perhaps just to see his poor language enriched. And no man's labours have so enriched Oriya as have Fakirmohan's.

THE FIRST CREATIVE PRODUCT

His first genuinely creative book, *Utkala Bhramanam* ('Travels in Orissa') is a further example of his amazing capacity for improvisation and proneness for path-breaking. It was written and published in the same period as his translations. Senapati was just out of the wood of the Bhuyan revolt, described in a previous chapter. Bidding farewell to the British political officers, who had come to Keonjhar in connection with the revolt, at the nearest railhead-town of Bhadrak in the district of Balasore, Fakirmohan was returning to his official headquarters at Anandapur on elephant back. And as he was riding, he had a brainwave. He felt that the contemporary celebrities of Orissa might as well be put into poetry. No sooner had the thought occurred to him, than he took out his pocket book and pencil and started scribbling as he moved along with the jogging and jolting pachyderm. By the time he reached Anandapur, his contemplated book was half gone through. And by the end of the third day, it was out of the local press.

This volume of verse-satire still remains unique in Oriya literature. It has not been repeated, and none but another master, like Fakirmohan, dare attempt such a poetical-cum-socio-political adventure. There is no parallel product to this even in Bengali or Hindi as far as this writer knows. Hence Senapati's *Utkala Bhramanam* might still be considered unique and original.

The book created a sensation all over Orissa. Its tell-tale thumb-nail descriptions of contemporary personalities in live phrases of broad humour and biting sarcasm made readers roar with laughter. He hammered away at the shamefully mercenary gang of illiterate *pandas* and Brahmins around

Lord Jagannath, and at the emerging new class of semi-literate English-educated *Babus* who found it convenient to treat their own language and culture with contempt, trying pathetically enough to be bad little Englishmen, instead of remaining good little Indians. Aiming his arrow at these unthinking aping hordes, he said that when he cast his eyes on these so-called learned *Babus*, it came to his mind that Charles Darwin might have got ideas for his theory of simian ancestry of man by only observing these monkeyish Indians. As regards their somnolescent complacence born out of utterly sciolistic knowledge of English and neglect of their mother tongues, he remarks : "Indeed, why should a dog worry about a home of its own, when it gets its daily bellyful by licking the thrown-off leaf-plates in the gutters ?"

In 1894, two years after the hilariously sententious publication of *Utkala Bhramanam*, poor Krushna Kumari passed away, leaving behind an utterly lonely, helpless and heartbroken husband. It was this implacable sorrow that turned the erstwhile verse-translator and light-hearted satirist into a prolifically creative poet. Here are Fakirmohan's own words on this new development in his personality :

"My habit of writing poems is a virtue which, to speak the truth, I have owed to my wife. She very much enjoyed listening to my compositions. I started writing poems, therefore, just to please her. That habit has continued so far, relieving my own mind of restlessness, since her passing away. Krushna Kumari used to read every day a few chapters of my *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, after her daily morning bath. Since her death, most of my poems have been composed in times of serious mental perturbance, personal mishap or incapacitating ailment, as a means of escape from the attendant vexations."

SOARING COSMOPOLITANISM

And as a result, we see now scores upon scores of poems by Fakirmohan on a surprisingly wide variety of topics. It is these poems, rather than the great fiction which he later produced and which has endowed on him unquestioned uniqueness in Oriya literature, that reveal his personality in

fulness and grandeur. What comes out from these innumerable, apparently unconnected, products, is an amazingly cosmopolitan mind and soul, warm with empathy for whatever was great or sublime.

As an illustration of such cosmopolitan sublimity of his mind, we might refer here to his unique poem 'Souls at the gate of Heaven'.

At the gateway of heaven, every departed soul, before entrance, has to satisfy the wily gate-keeper as to his attitude to humanity as a whole, rather than his blind observance of rituals of his particular sect.

First the divine gate-keeper meets the soul of a supposedly pious Muslim on earth, bragging about his unfailingly-observed five *namazes* a day, his strict fast during Ramzan and his single-minded loyalty to the one prophet of Allah, Mohammed. "But did'nt you ever seek the blessedness of the company of Moses, the Buddha, Christ and such other prophets of God also?" asks the celestial watchman. To that question, the orthodox Muslim replies, "How could I do that ? Aren't they all kaffirs ?" The divine gate-keeper tells him decisively that the Kingdom of God was surely not for such as he.

Then approaches an equally dogmatic (Hindu) Vaishnava, priding on his string of holy *tulsi* beads round his neck, and his ceaseless muttering of God's names. The gate-keeper tells him, however, that his tonsured pate, *tulsi*-decorated neck and his body, covered with the sacred shawl, were all reduced to ashes already on the earth below. While on earth he had completely ignored God's great phophets, like the Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed. The kingdom of God wasn't also for such as he.

So cross-questioned were people of other sects, none being found sizable to the real divine yardstick. At last the heavenly gate-keeper speaks about the sublime essence of genuine religiosity on earth. "God sent various prophets to earth to teach essential human virtues to mankind. The Buddha taught rationalism and detachment; Jesus, love; and Mohammed, faith. They are all God's messengers, to be equally respected by all humanity. Love, faith, devotion and detachment are the

qualities of the soul that alone shall entitle you to entrance into the Kingdom of God, and not hatred of one another or mere external observances. Whosoever thinks another man different, hell perhaps is the place for him after death, and not heaven."

WORLD VIEW

Whereas his poet-friends Radhanath and Madhusudan stuck to only 'poetic' issues or topics, the almost unschooled Fakirmohan's psyche was not trammelled by any intellectual apron-strings. He had no opportunity whatsoever to learn rhetoric from books or pedants. So he spoke as naturally as thoughts, ideas and feelings came to him, aiming at transparent communication, completely unaware of the processes of studied effect. His bubbling genius was ever ready with a message for his readers over whatever was happening around him. And unlike most of us, he possessed the personal heroism to speak out his mind in the interest of truth, justice and rationalism, caring little for unpalatable reactions. Fakirmohan's poetic topics, therefore, cover a wide range, from 'A poet's nagging partner' to the tears of the divorced Josephine, or from the miseries of the Indian peasant to those of the Young Hindu widows. He welcomed with open arms the new glories and achievements of Japan in several poems and set them up as examples before his countrymen. He heartily sang of the delicately perfumed *husna hena* flower-plant supposed to have been imported from Japan. He was so enamoured, with the culture, discipline, and the deep sense of aesthetics of the Japanese people that he was planning a voyage to the land of the rising sun, even in his ripe old age. Maybe, with a desire to demolish the egocentric Indian myth that virtuous feminity exists only in this country, he wrote a long poem on the faithful Roman wife, Lucretia. He has a parallel poem on Cleopatra also. The poet's historical moral from the careers of the two heroines was that both the once-powerful Ptolemies and Tarquins were completely wiped out by the deluded provocation which the gazelle eyes of pretty women produce on even sensible menfolk. There are poems by Fakirmohan,

similarly, on Krishna, Jesus Christ and Tukaram as well on 'A dead *palasa* tree', 'A pair of loving doves', and 'The last reflection of a dead leaf on a tree before it falls to the ground'.

TEARS FOR A SIMPLE WOMAN

But in this motley crowd of Fakirmohan's poetic world, consisting of epics, *Upanishads* and numberless lyrics and satires on all manner of topics, it is those that are drenched with his bitter tears of tormented bereavement after the death of his grandma and wife Krushna Kumari that move most readers' hearts, ringing as they are with the instant, inaudible music of the soul.

The dedicatory piece of his *Pushpa-mala* ('The garland'), containing poems on Krushna Kumari, might enkindle noble passion in the heart of true lovers anywhere in the world. Here are the first few lines,

> Beautiful Krushna Kumari, the queen of my poor cottage,
> My eternal sweet-heart, dear as life,
> And my constant companion, the apple of my eyes,
> See, how all your excellent virtues
> Have got intermingled in my very blood streams,
> with your departure.
> Have'nt known a more virtuous woman in life,
> Or a wife, more fully dedicated than yourself
> To her husband,
> And the loveliness of the full moon
> In the blue heavens,
> Or of the pearls of dew
> On full-blown roses and lotuses,
> Pale into banality, against your tears
> That flowed from your eyes,
> While in communion with the divine.
> I feel now, as though, that it is the beauteous peace
> Of your face,
> That is now spread over the whole firmament.

*

At night, when the world was quiet,
And just we two
Sat on the terrace of our house
Or in the garden,
And observed the moon and the stars
Float slowly up above in the sky,
Shedding heavenly light all around,
I did feel, darling, — didn't I — in those quiet moments, that,
We too, were twin stars,
Like those up in the sky.

The poems 'She parted with smiles, leaving me in disconsolate tears', 'Shall I see that smiling face again ?' and 'Can anybody enlighten me where my dear companion is gone ?' are full of emotion, stemming out of the depths of a genuinely tortured soul, and such noble hymnised love only a great poetic psyche could offer at the feet of a loving woman.

EPIC ON THE BUDDHA

It is but natural for a rational mind like Fakirmohan's to be attracted towards Buddhism. Like many of his other 'firsts', which he contributed to Oriya literature, he has given it also the first good book on Buddhism, — an epic covering the life and noble mission of the Buddha with a long, learned and well-informed introduction which has not dated at all even after half a century. His *Baudhavatara Kavya* cannot pretend to any originality, like Asvaghosha's excellent *Buddha Charita*, the anonymous *Lalita Vistara*, and the universally popular *light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold. But in a literature glutted with myths, as in the case of most Oriya *Kavyas*, this verse-epic written in different metres, dealing as it does with a historical world-personality, highlighting a rational outlook on life and religion, was certainly path-breaking.

NAGGING WIFE

And there perhaps can be no better conclusion to this

chapter than a few tell-tale lines from his poem 'The poet's nagging partner', echoing the sufferings and eternal discontent of that unfortunate female tribe — the poets' wives, and also the perennial plight of the poor, devoted sons of Saraswati in all countries and ages.

"Says the poet's wife to the poet : 'Can't you see with your eyes wide open, how already in shambles is my so called household? And how dare you still keep turning a deaf ear to all my repeated warnings and pathetic appeals, busy day and night, with only your metres, rhymes and syllables which do not bring in even a few coppers with which I could keep the family's pot boiling? Why are you still writing those absurd verbal gimmicks, although I have constantly forbidden you to do so? Don't you see, with your eyes open, how people, all around us, acquire money, comfort, clothes and vehicles, adopting various clever ways? Have you any brain, if you can't see all that? Who cares for your wretched recitations, pray? I am sick indeed of perpetually advising you against this, your accursed addiction to silly rhymings. But please know that the money-lender came yesterday, throwing out to my face, his last ultimatum. I cannot imagine how you could have the patience even then to sit still in that corner, just penning on wretched barren couplets'!"

Chapter X

AWAKENING OF A GIANT YARNER

FAKIRMOHAN is respected all over Orissa as the father of, and the greatest figure in, Oriya fiction. But till his middle fifties, he had absolutely no inkling of that remarkable potentiality in him. He was communicating himself mainly through verse till very late in life. Not that he had not written any prose or fiction at all. We have seen how, even when he was no more than a low-paid schoolmaster, he had set up not only a printing press at Balasore, but had started publishing journals to propagate his modernistic views and carry on a ceaseless battle against national wrongs.

When he noticed that stories were the main cause of the popularity of the Bengali periodicals, of those days, he tried his hand at that literary génre. In the sixties of the last century he published perhaps the earliest modern Oriya short story in his literary magazine *Bodhodayini*. It was entitled 'Lachhamania'. But it is as yet untraced.

For twentyfive years from 1871 to 1896, Fakirmohan remained either busy as an administrative officer or financially helpless during long spells of unemployment. He was a sick man also. The Senapati Press was wound up before its progenitor ventured out into the wider world beyond the small district town of Balasore for fresh pastures. The journals which he started were left in charge of others, but they soon became defunct.

During the twentyfive years after he left Balasore there was no second 'Lachhamania', though there was an enormous heap of poetry, provoked by passing occasions and situation, which we have already discussed.

After Fakirmohan retired from his desultory administrative posts, he settled down in his modern-style garden-house at Cuttack. At about this time, Orissa's great editor, Viswanath Kar, a highly respected friend of the three partners of Orissa's literary troika, Radhanath, Madhusudan and Fakirmohan, brought out his famous Oriya monthly *Utkala Sahitya* from Cuttack. To make his tray of literary wares more attractive, Viswanath naturally invited stories from all possible quarters. He appealed to Fakirmohan also to try. And, lo and behold, it was this that led to the awakening of a sleeping giant.

Henceforth, till his passing away in 1918, Fakirmohan kept throwing out stories and novels which would have done credit to any young genius in the prime of his creativity. It was an astoundingly productive old age, unique in the stories of literatures, when we take into account the terrible domestic unhappiness he had to pass through in those years of retirement, during which time one looks forward to grateful and affectionate care from family members. He was not even spared the intellectual congeniality of Cuttack where practically all his friends and co-workers had settled down. With his son and daughter-in-law moving in, the patriarch seems to have been compelled to quit his well-planned garden-house at Cuttack, to spend ten lonely years at Balasore where also, thank God, he had built another sumptuous suburban villa.

Both these houses at Cuttack and Balasore can claim credit for the remarkable products in prose and verse of his ailing, lonely and unhappy ageing years. And these were mostly in response to the requests of editors of the two important contemporary literary monthlies of Orissa, *Utkala Sahitya* and *Mukura*.

HE WROTE AS PEOPLE SPEAK

By the time Fakirmohan started his new career of a fictionist, Bengal's early prose luminaries had already sunk below the horizon, after their allotted hours of resplendent shining. Peary Chandra Mitra, Akshoya Kumar Dutta, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bhudeb Mookerjee and Bankim Chandra had all passed away. That Fakirmohan was fully acquainted with the

works of these Bengali celebrities may be taken for granted. But what makes the quality and character of his prose-products all the more remarkable is that this semi-literate genius steadfastly refused to be affected by any of those masters. Completely breaking away from familiar literary paths, he built a magnificent royal road of his own, remaining uniquely original in all the triple stands of material, style and destination.

As against the brilliant bunch of Bengal's creative talents, formally disciplined in modern learning and in the wisdom of both East and West, at the newly opened University of Calcutta, here was Fakirmohan with only less than two years' primary school education to his credit, but flaming forth in all his writings as a humanist of the purest shade, open to all healthy ideas of modernity, striking smashing blows at the corrosive social cancer of a parasitical, hereditary and mostly ignorant priestly class as well as other stinking accretions in Indian society, standing squarely for equality of women and for better conditions of the peasant, the backbone of the Indian nation. And anticipating by more than half a century all the hypocritical slogans around the 'people' in Indian politics as well as in modern Indian literatures of to-day, this genius of Orissa wrote of the real people in their real day-to-day homely speech, and really also for them. Few lines of the hypocritical 'peoples' poets' of these days can get into the heads of even professors, not to speak of the real 'people', whereas Fakirmohan's poetry or prose can be tried on the rural population in any part of Orissa, any day.

VOICE OF THE COMMON MAN

Thanks mainly to Fakirmohan, Orissa has never known the bitter literary controversy in many a modern Indian Language, such as, Telugu or Bengali, over the *sadhu bhasa* and the colloquial speech of the illiterate folk. As a matter of fact, Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao, reflecting more or less the contemporary styles in Bengali, had already had the *sadhu bhasa* style weighted in the readers' favour in Orissa. But Fakirmohan's unusual and unexpected performance in the field was almost a staggering blow to that supposed literary

consummation. Readers suddenly discovered in Fakirmohan's fiction the genuine articulation of the soil. It is true that in books like *Alaler Gharer Dulal* ('The spoilt child of a rich family') or *Hutom Penchar Naksa* ('Sketches by a watching owl') attempts were made in Bengali in the fifties and sixties of the last century to step down a little below the grand heights of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others to pick up Calcutta cockney as a literary vehicle, but, by the time Fakirmohan started his stories and novels in 1897, those adventures were practically forgotten even in Bengal. Real parallels in Bengali to Fakirmohan's achievement in Oriya are to be found perhaps in the truly 'nectarine talks' (*kathamrita*) of the great Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Like Fakirmohan, he also rose right out of the soil, their souls remaining practically unsophisticated, though they stayed ever open to light and vibration from all parts of the outer world.

It must be said here, however, that Fakirmohan, though one of its unchallenged masters, never made a fetish of the 'common man's speech', as half-century earlier Wordsworth and Coleridge had theoretically proclaimed it in their joint introduction to *Lyrical Ballads*. As a matter of fact, Senapati has revealed himself to be a master of many styles. He has adroitly used the grand style also, when the situation demanded, as well as the racy idiom of the unwashed millions.

A NATIONAL SAGA

It is remarkable that, though his stories and novels were sporadically produced in unplanned abundance, we find in them an amazing wholeness, a well-implemented super-plan, and a vast polychrome mural, presenting, at the end, an integrated picture of a whole people. His four major novels and the many long and short stories fully reflect the national life of Orissa covering two continuous centuries, as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* does for the total national life of the Spaniards. And though Fakirmohan's most distinguishing creative credit lies in his bringing the common man and woman into the charismatic dignity of the literary world, long before even Lenins and Gandhis did so in the socio-political spheres, he has not deli-

berately left out any social category out of his broad canvas. His love for the common man and woman did not stem from any unrealistic and dogmatic socio-economic dogma or slogan. With him the common man was but an integral part and parcel of his sublime humanism which was far above any particular caste and class. Readers of Fakirmohan, therefore, meet all types of people from all strata of society, from *rajas* to scavengers and from idealistic heroes and heroines to downright knaves and rogues. His extraordinarily objective genius has put in as many rogues, knaves and gullible fools among the rural as among the urban societies of our land. He had absolutely no romantic illusions about our villages, which unfortunately still linger with us.

Fakirmohan may thus be styled the most clear-sighted litterateur in modern India, barring perhaps only Tagore. He never yielded to any narrow parochialism or falsehood at the expense of his broad and sublime humanism.

CHAPTER XI

FAITHFUL MIRROR OF LIFE

ESSENTIALLY pragmatic, Fakirmohan felt impelled to put pen to paper only when particular events in his surroundings interested him as deserving of depiction. Most of his fiction stands, therefore, on a solid, though invisible, rock of actual happenings.

BE A RAT AGAIN

Take, for instance, his wellknown short story, 'Be a rat again'. A head clerk in a district town had a personal factotum recruited from his village from the caste of barbers. The man was clever, besides being hefty in physique and a good-for-everything type. When the newly created Salt Department of the East India Company needed a number of village-level watchers, our head clerk's favourite barber put in his earnest prayer before his master for one of those jobs. And through his master's good offices, the poor barber did get one such post. Posted to an interior village, the former factotum, now clad in official uniform, loomed large before the eyes of the simple village folk, as a limb of the all-powerful *sarkar*. The barber-boy of yester-day was now the awe inspiring *Jamadar sahib*. He had his office-cum-residence in the village and engaged a servant to do his cooking and odd jobs. But this servant recruited from the caste of cowherds refused to wash the barber-*jamadar's* eating-plates for fear of losing his caste and, after pressurisation from his caste-fellows, refused to work altogether. The upstart barber-*jamadar* could not forget or forgive this social umbrage. Not long after, he had that cowherd-boy involved in a concocted case of making clandestine

salt, had him arrested and sent him up for trial to the district headquarters. He hoped, thereby, to kill two birds with one stone : to have revenge upon the recalcitrant young man, teaching thereby a lesson to the whole village, and also get a reward from government for catching a salt-thief.

Meanwhile, the swollen-headed barber had dared insult even the village-priest. The irate and offended old Brahmin could do no more than throw out his silent curse of 'Be a rat again' on the erstwhele low-class factotum.

The trying Magistrate declared the case false and acquitted the poor cowherd. But the village community, afraid of getting involved in similar cases in future, took discretion to be the better part of valour and decided to pay regular cash contributions to the all-powerful *jamadar sahib* as a measure of appeasement and as a protection from vexatious legal proceedings in future.

This worked very well. But it came to the notice of the authorities that, working on the fears of the people, the entire Salt Department watch-force was earning corrupt money, seriously affecting government resources. Hence the authorities deployed vigilance men to detect corrupt officials. And our barber-*jamadar* was among the first few to be rounded up. As a consequence, he not only lost his job, but ended up also with a term of imprisonment.

Imprisonment in those days meant a terrible social pollution which could be washed off with only expensive expiatory rituals. What with the expenses of his defence at court and of the expiatory rituals, the barber-*jamadar*, after his release from jail, found himself reduced to poverty and started on his humble ancestral vocation again, thus fulfilling the insulted Brahmin's curse, 'Be a rat again'.

Fakirmohan certainly did not invent this story. Nor was he the man to establish the sure efficacy of a Brahmin's curse. The barber and the Brahmin, who represent almost the two extremes in the Hindu social hierarchy, have been made to confront each other in the story to highlight the urgly extent to which swollen-headed upstarts can go and generally do. That this short story of Fakirmohan, like many others, was

based on the rapidly changing kaleiedoscope of events around him, is proved by the autobiography of John Beames, in which he relates his experiences of clandestine salt manufacture in the district of Balasore in the seventies of the last century. It is intriguing to discover that this liberal-minded British officer anticipated Gandhi by well-nigh a century in his warm sympathy with the natural right of Indians to make their own salt.

LACHHAMA

Let us examine some of Fakirmohan's novels for such realistic thematic skeletons. It is well known that by the time Aliverdi Khan became Nawab (1740) of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, the grand Mughuls at Delhi and Agra had become merely titular, and the marauding Maratha horsemen had already been able to put the sprawling outlying regions to ransom. To these menacing hordes of *bargees* sallying out of Nagpur, the headquarters of the Bhonslas, Orissa became a most convenient pasture land. Murshidabad, Aliverdi's capital, was far off. Hence, the innumerable Khandayat chiefs of Orissa actually bore the brunt of these rapacious Maratha sallies. But those being of the hit-and-run character and always sudden and unexpected, nothing effective could be done by way of retaliation. The *bargees,* on the other hand, were not soldiers so much, as primitive robbers and vandals. Avoiding straight fights, they delighted only in looting the common people of the countryside, and put whole villages to fire in reaction to whatever defensive resistance the villagers might have put up at the start.

The Orissa *subah* of the Mughuls extended from the Ganga to the Godavari as under independent Hindu monarchs before. The Maratha inroads gradually spread from the western parts of this *subah* to its north-east region. Year after year, this extensive area cried in agony under million satanic hooves of the marauding *bargee* horsemen. The treacherous killing of Bhaskar Pandit, the notorious *bargee* leader, by one of Aliverdi's generals in 1744 brought still greater misery to the people as well as to Aliverdi's government.

Fakirmohan's *Lachhama* covers these pathetically dark days

of his people in the last half of the 18th century.

CHHAMANA ATHAGUNTHA ('Six acres and thirty-two decimals')

The British came to Orissa in 1803, after defeating the Marathas. And, with the British, streamed in hordes of Bengali officials. The Paik rebellions of 1804 and 1817-18 against British administration in Orissa left the feudal Khandayat militia deprived of both its age-old swords as well as free-hold lands which they had engaged for centuries, due to the ruthless measures adopted by the British, in the wake of the patriotic revolt, thus changing overnight thousands of gentlemen-farmers and peasant-soldiers into beggars and coollies. Cowri, the traditional common currency of Orissa, was forbidden as legal tender, thousands of simple Oriya peasants losing their ancestral acres due to their inability to pay taxes in the new coins that were in short supply. But the worst misery to the common people ensued from the complicated land-revenue system and the notorious *sunset law* which enabled even clerks in Calcutta to become owners of historic estates in Orissa. This created the absolutely unprecedented social phenomenon of 'absentee landlordism'. Thanks to the newly introduced revenue laws, lands could change hands rapidly, the simple, unwary common village artisans and peasants being the victims of clever neighbours through the support of the newly rising class of lawyers at the British courts.

Fakirmohan's *Chhamana Athaguntha* ('Six acres and thirty-two decimals') deals with this sad phase, spanning the first fifty years of British rule in Orissa, after that unfortunate land's purgatorial experience in the hands of the Maratha *bargees* for more fifty years.

MAMU ('Maternal uncle')

By the sixties of the last century, Orissa could boast of no more than the beginnings of modern education with a few high English schools at district headquarters. Thanks to the British administrators who by this time had fully realised the sad plight of the Oriyas on their own soil. there were jobs

waiting in at least the lower echelons of government for the few Oriyas who came out with high school certificates. Sons of families, once rich, but now in straitened conditions, who were lucky to get such jobs, left their distant villages, took up residence in cities and brought their wives also. And once admitted into the magic circle of revenue offices, they tried to restore the lost glory of their families with knavery.

Fakirmohan's *Mamu* ('Maternal uncle') covers this sociological phase in the new cities of Orissa in the second half of the last century, paralleling the little satanic world of petty village men and women bent on acquisition of money and power through unscrupulous manipulations as revealed in *Chhamana Athaguntha.*

PRAYASCHITTA ('Expiation')

By 1978, when Fakirmohan passed away, Orissa had however, become 'modern' in many ways. The modern age in Oriya literature had already started in 1872 with the publication of the *Kabitabali* from the joint pens of Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao. The Oriyas by that time had become fully aware of what their race once was and what they should do to restore its lost glory. Exactly a hundred years after the British occupation of Orissa, the educated Oriyas, under the auspices of the Utkala Samilani in 1903, had started demanding the unification of all the scattered Oriya-speaking tracts. Noble Oriyas, like Mr. M. S. Das and Pandit Gopabandhu Das, were now thundering out Orissa's legitimate politico-adminstrative demands in provincial and imperial councils. An academy of Oriya literature (*Utkala Sahitya Samaja*) was established at Cuttack, and vigorous Oriya weeklies and monthlies were constantly harking back the Oriya people to their former greatness.

However, social distintegration had already started, as a result of the impact of Western education which the new generation of Oriyas were receiving both at Cuttack and Calcutta. Caste began to lose its tight grip on the new university products, with passive demands to select their own brides. Alcoholism and at least a show of atheism became also

widespread.

Fakirmohan's last novel *Prayaschitta*, published in 1915, refers to this development in Orissa's social life, leaving it almost exactly where the next phase, under the revolutionary impact of a political Mahatma, was to begin. It is significant that, though Fakirmohan had talked with Lokamanya Tilak at Madras where he had gone in his extreme old age of seventy five to attend an annual session of the Indian National Congress, nowhere in his extensive writings does he mention Gandhi, although by 1918 he had already become *mahatma*. Like most Indians of his generation, Fakirmohan had perhaps deep faith in *Pax Britannica*, although this insightful intellectual never missed an opportunity in his writings to throw out veiled flings at the stupidity of Indians remaining contented as hewers of wood and drawers of water while the clever whites from across the seven seas were heartily enjoying the cream of the land.

Says he, in biting satire, while describing the village tank in *Chhamana Athaguntha* (1897) : "About a score or more of white herons would be seen scouring the mud-belts close to the banks of this tank, right from dawn up to nightfall in desperate efforts at getting their meagre daily fill of small fry. But behold, how a couple of cormorants flew down from nowhere and, after having bellyfulls of large fish with only a few dives into the depths of the tank, flew away, over-satisfied. A cormorant would even be seen now on the high bank, spreading its wings in the sun in excellent contentment, as *memsahibs* do in their evening gowns, on the eve of a party. Oh ye humble herons of India, see how the English cormorants fly across distant seas to our land and return gleefully, with their erstwhile empty pockets filled with excellent fish, while you fools, who live on the boughs of trees standing close to this tank, fail to get more than a few of the small fry after hard day-long struggles. A bitter war of existence is on now. You may expect more and more cormorants flying thither very soon. They might eat all the fish in the tank. If you are keen on your own survival, you had better behave like those cormorants. You have to learn

how to swim the seas. I do not know else, in future, you could even keep body and soul together."

The political evertones in these allegorical reflections of the visionary and patriotic author could be clear enough to readers even half a century ago.

BREATHING MEN AND WOMEN

But let us not forget two basic facts about the great author while discussing his novels : that he had no more than a year-and-a-half of formal education to his credit, and that he never entertained any desire whatsoever to shine and triumph as a professional writer of any sort, not to speak of ever becoming a path-breaking novelist. Poems, epics, essays, stories and novels, he nonchalantly took in his stride, as and when it occurred to him to indulge in them, never bothering about rhetorical or aesthetical finesse or any special impact on his readers. And exactly for these reasons, his works carry an unsophisticated naturalness about them, giving us the genuine, inimitable, racy, unlearned speech of the common man and woman of the village or city, but making it tremendously meaningful with the intuitive observations of a genius and the movingly naive art of a born reconteur and master craftsman. We must not, therefore, expect in this almost unschooled pioneer, the throughly disciplined architectonics of a Bennet or a Hardy, or the chaotic stream-of-consciousness adventures of modern fiction. But what gives an immortality of flesh and blood to his simple plots is his capacity of crowding his narration with real breathing men and women as he knew them in life and as we also know.

Fiction in Oriya literature has certainly proliferated since Fakirmohan's time, some sort of forward movement being in the very nature of things. But no Oriya novelist so far has succeeded in excelling or even paralleling Senapati in this grand art of creation of real men and women or in speaking the genuine illiterate dialect of the common man, rural or urban. We see plenty of fresh imitative fashion, mannerism, specialisation, label and propaganda along with unashamed plagiarism in broad daylight, but nowhere has that natural

inborn power of creating genuinely Oriya men and women been displayed so far, repeating that lively procession of unforgettable characters in Senapati's fiction that seem to have sprung right out of down-to-earth life.

And as we look back, we are amazed to find all through his works, written half-a-century ago, deep humanistic sympathies going out in torrents for the common man, along with a delicately balanced ethical sense and unswerving objectivity that nonchalantly place downright knaves among the supposed simple folk of the lower strata of our society, as well as good souls among the supposedly satanic upper strata. This shows the great author's firm faith that, irrespective of caste, religion, or social position, individual sufferings are bound up with, and are in proportion to, our moral failures, and that God endows particular individuals in all classes of society with nobility of character as lamps of guidance to others.

The moving tragedy in the quiet rural sorroundings of Senapati's *Chhama'na A'thaguntha* might well illustrate such unconscious high lights in his fiictional creation.

Ramachandra Mangaraja was a poor orphan boy in an interior Orissan village. He somehow survived through door to door begging in the villages, but being born with native cleverness he became keenly aware of his social situation right from early childhood. As a retribution against his ill luck, he resolved to establish himself in his own village as the biggest man of property. He started with petty business and money lending, and was invariably successful in those small trials at fortune making.

Mangaraja's village belonged to the Estate of a Muslim absentee landlord in Bengal who kept demanding remittances from his local factor for his dissipations at his manor house in the district of Midnapore. The wily Mangaraja, comparatively well off by now, was closely watching the situation. A time came when the factor found himself at end of his tether and reported his inability to meet his master's demands any further.

And in came the shrewd Mangaraja to fill the gap and, duping the dissipated zamindar with gratifications, got himself

appointed as his new rent agent. It was no great adventure for him to acquire the whole estate a little later at a court auction, which he himself had cleverly manipulated for arrears of rent.

Being a zamindar now, he began a mad race for properties. He started snatching money and lands of other people by fair means or foul. The poor street Arab of yesterday was now not only a landlord, but the biggest man of property and the greatest banker, within a rural area of twenty square miles or more.

Close to his village there was a small settlement of weavers. They lived in a world of their own, guided in all their affairs by a *panchayat* headed by a hereditary headman. Their present headman was illiterate Bhagia, fully symbolising, in his personality, the proverbial simplicity of his tribe. So also was his wife Saria. Their idyllic wedded bliss remained incomplete, however, for lack of a child. Saria poured out all her maternal emotions, therefore, on a pet cow.

A consolidated plot of six acres and thirty-two decimals of paddy land — the most fertile in the village — belonged to Bhagia. Mangaraja's ever expanding fields, in the meantime, had come up to Bhagia's small but excellent plot. Should he stop there?

If Managaraja had, by now, enough of monetary power, he was not neglecting the other irrespressible instinct in man, sex. There was a holy lamp burning in the midst of his accumulating sins in the person of his wife, respected by all the simple village folk as the invisible cause of her knavish husband's prosperity. But ignoring this virtuous partner, the perverse Mangaraja surrendered his soul to a notorious concubine, named Champa, who dominated not only his household, but all his other affairs.

Coming to know of his appetite for poor Bhagia's six acres and thirty-two decimals, shrewd Champa' lighted on the simple Saria, as like a hawk on a dove. She adroitly played on her childlessness, with promises of sure redress, if she could persuade her husband to build a temple to the village goddess, lying roofless under a banyan tree on the bank of the village tank. To see herself relieved of the ignominy of

childlessness, poor Saria, after much initial hesitation, yielded at last to Champa''s mischievous propositions, fully believing in her hypocritical promises.

Bhagia got the money for the future temple by mortgaging his six acres and thirty-two decimals to Mangaraja. He did not understand a word of the legal document on which he had blindly put his thumb-impression. For the money due to Bhagia on the mortgage, Mangaraja deposited a few cartloads of stone close to the village-goddess. Poor Bhagia had no further wherewithals to put stone upon stone for raising the temple. And as the mortgage time expired, Mangaraja started legal proceedings against innocent Bhagia and easily got a decree. He was now in legal possession not only of Bhagia's covetable six acres and thirty-two decimals, but, towards interest and cost of the suit, got possession of the poor weaver couple's homestead also. Homeless Bhagia was now seen in the streets, begging his very bread. After this nefarious transaction, Champa''s eyes were on Saria's pet cow, Neta. She was not only their only movable property, but half childless Saria's life. Seeing her being taken away forcibly by unsympathetic hands, and finding themselves shelterless, our poor, simple, weaver-heroine Saria ran after her cow right up to Mangaraja's backyard and refused to budge, crying her eyes out for her dear animal. For her obstinacy, the poor woman was mercilessly beaten by Mangaraja's mercenaries. The delicate lady could not stand these tortures long and died on the back verandah of Mangaraja's house.

At this time Mangaraja's pious wife also died and there was a sudden turn in his affairs. Saria's tragic death not only drove her simple husband stark mad, but invited a police enquiry. Managaraja was arrested and tried. He could not be held directly responsible for Saria's death. He was found well within his legal rights in taking possession of Bhagia's homestead as well as paddy-lands. He was sentenced to a few months of hard labour, however, for forcibly taking away Saria's cow.

In those days the criminal and the insane were housed together. Unknown to each other, Mangaraja and mad Bhagia

were now inmates of the same jail at Cuttack. Mangaraja's room-mates in jail were some men whom he had been instrumental in sending to prison on concocted legal proceedings. Out of sheer vengeance, his victims assaulted him one night. As he was being treated for injuries by the prison-doctor, mad Bhagia ran to him and tried desperately to cut off his nose. Poor Mangaraja's condition became critical and he was let out of jail before time, to die ultimately in the courtyard of his deserted house, repeating in his last-hour delirium the half-articulate words 'six acres and thirty-two decimals', 'six acres and thirty-two decimals', stilled at last in a redeeming vision of the bright astral image of late virtuous wife.

During the absence of Mangaraja in jail, Champa' collected all his money and precious jewellery and secretly left the village. Her plan was to proceed to Cuttack to set up a house of ill-fame with Mangaraja's barber-servant Gobinda as both procurer and safeguard. But he was a married man and was already a father. All that he wanted was a share of the loot, so that giving up his ancestral vocation, he could set up a shop and earn respectability in the eyes of his villagers. At a lonely wayside inn where they stopped for a night, the two had violent differences over their divergent programmes. Govinda, in a pique, refused to eat and sat on the outer verandah, while Champa' contentedly had her dinner and snored in deep slumber, with the small but precious bag as her pillow.

Musing for long in hunger and exhaustion, Govinda resolved on a way out of his vexations. He took out his sharp razor out of his barber's kit, went inside the dark inn and murdered sleeping Champa without much difficulty. He now ran with the precious bundle to the nearest ferry-ghat. The boatman, reluctant to break his sleep for just one passenger, agreed at last, after desperate Govinda offered him an unexpectedly large consideration. But while the boat was mid stream, he saw in the first glimmer of dawn too many blood stains on Govinda's clothings and started questioning him. Exactly at this moment, the postal runner was seen on the opposite bank, with the mail bags. Apprehending certain detection and arrest. Govinda jumped into the river with

Mangaraja's ill-gotten money and jewellery, never to rise again.

In how many works in Indian literature has such moving and sublimating tragedy been wrung out of such simple village folk ? Who before Fakirmohan had created such dignified heroes and heroines out of rural ragamuffins and pastoral fools ? And not in this book only, but in practically all his fictional products, Fakirmohan's loveliest creations are indeed men and women of the class of barbers, weavers, agricultural labourers and untouchables.

The wonder of wonders is that Fakirmohan never had any plan to write a novel with the significant title of *Chhamana Athaguntha* ('Six acres and thirty-two decimals'). Pressed again and again by his editor-friend, Viswanath Kar, for a 'story' for his *Utkala Sahitya,* Fakirmohan started writing it. This was his second attempt in this literary génre after a gap of twenty years or so. But this second story slowly developed into a novel.

No wonder that *Chhamana Athaguntha* was an immediate literary success in Orissa, paralleling, perhaps, the serial publication of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers.* Like that English classic, it made Oriyas roll with laughter over the incongruities in their own national life, which none before had observed so keenly as to transform them into such excellent humour. It was surrealistic that as the story in the pages of *Utkala Sahitya* entered the stage of police inquiry over Saria's death and Champa's murder, people from distant villages came to Cuttack to witness the court proceedings and see the real Ramachandra Mangaraja in the dock. How many works of fiction could claim to have roused such popular reactions as this ?

CHAPTER XII

MARVELLOUS MODERNITY

IN bold contrast to the rural setting of *Chhamana Athaguntha*, stands Fakirmohan's *Prayaschitta* ('Expiation') with the city of Cuttack as its main theatre. Modern university products and upper class people in the last part of the 19th century are its main actors and actresses. A generation or two of Oriyas had at last come up with labels of Western enlightenment granted by the newly-started universities and colleges. Fakirmohan often admitted in half-mockery that he was perfectly 'unenlightened' as compared with those shallow English-educated products with bits of unassimilated Western thinking. There was a proneness now for defiance of parental authority and caste inhibitions. Fakirmohan's observant eyes did not fail to see how most of these unbalanced green horns soon came to grief in society as did members of the older generation in their irrational and dogmatic adherence to nonsensical orthodoxies. Both the categories had to do serious expiation (*prayaschitta*) for their respective maladjustments and imbalances in Senapati's significant novel of that name. The story runs as follows :—

One Sankarsana Mohanty of the district of Cuttack became rich. Purchasing an estate, he became, so to say, a small *raja*. But he was always conscious of his humble social origin and of the not-very-dignified way in which he had come up the economic ladder.

Close to his estate was that of Baishnab Patnaik, a genuine aristocrat, who was full of contempt for the parvenue Sankarsana whose dream in life was to be accepted as Patnaik's social equal, and Patnaik knew all about it.

In his efforts at adjustment to modern conditions, Patnaik, though himself ignorant of English, sent his only son Govinda Chandra to Cuttack for an English education. The boy was handsome and sincerely interested in intellectual pursuits, though not very brilliant. As he entered college, he was accepted by his undergraduate friends as a budding poet also, and was looked upon as one of the hopes, not only of his family, but even of the Oriya people as a whole. These early batches of Orissa's undergraduates, to which Gobinda Chandra belonged, were pretty enthusiastic about national problems, like social reform. They had their 'discussion clubs' (*alochana sabha*), in which young, handsome, poetic and aristocratic Govinda Chandra shone as a sort of cynosure.

It was in these meetings that friendship grew up between Govinda Chandra and Rajibalochana, a parasitical nephew of Sankarsana Mohanty, the new-rich, dying for social uplift. Mohanty had a beautious marriageable daughter, named Indumati. Expecting rich rewards from his uncle, Rajibalochana tried to raise his uncle's social status by arranging the marriage of Indumati with Gobinda Chandra, without the knowledge of the latter's parents. To raise romantic emotions in the budding poet, Rajibalochana gave out that his cousin-sister Indumati was not only supremely beautiful, but was also a budding poetess of high order.

THE DARWINIAN STRATAGEM

Keen-eyed Fakirmohan had already seen, fifty years ago, how as a by-product of the spread of superficial English education, touts who could do anything for a consideration had already cropped up in the cities. One Kamalalochana stands in *Prayaschitta* as an excellent representative of this new species in Indian Society. Rajibalochana caught hold of this Kamalalochana, who, for a small consideration, prepared an excellent paper on the Darwinian theory of natural selection. This was read by him in a meeting of the *alochana sabha* presided over by the young prince Govinda Chandra. Arising out of this scientific dissertation, based on the recently published world shaking book *Origin of the Species* by Charles

Darwin, a resolution was passed in the *sabha* affirming the birthright of young men to select their life-partners irrespective of caste.

This, coupled with Rajibalochana's rosy-hued description of Indumati's physical graces as well as rare artistic accomplishments, turned young Govinda Chandra's head. He agreed to marry in the family of socially inferior Mohanty, knowing fully well that this alliance would break the hearts of his loving old parents. And when the news of this secret wedding did reach the home of the Patnaiks, it really shattered not only old Baishnab Patnaik's complacent aristocracy, but his entire family life.

Henceforth, it was Rajibalochana's endavour to see to it that Govinda Chandra never again met his parents. But when news reached his ears at Cuttack that his old mother was on her death bed and all that she desired was to have a last look at her only child, he made preparations to start for his village. Rajiblochana now moved quickly to upset Govinda's arrangements. He ran post-haste to his uncle and, apprising him of what Govinda's meeting with his parents might mean to Indumati's future, successfully pressurised the poor innocent Indumati to put her signature to a poem, implying an emotional appeal to her husband to be with her as soon as possible. This finely-composed poetic epistle was too good to be ignored by any young husband and the romantic Govinda Chandra, postponing his visit to his parents, started at once to meet Indumati.

It was monsoon time and a dark night too, when Govinda reached his father-in-law's village. It so happened that a few daring robberies had been committed nearby. Govinda did not know this at all. He was dreaming of springing a surprise on Indumati. He knew that Indu's apartments were right on the bank of a river. Discarding the social protocols, he took recourse to a foot path along the river bank and knocked at Indu's window when it was near midnight. With the recent robberies fresh in mind, these nocturnal knocks threw Indu's maid-in-company into a panicky frenzy, and she began to scream. This brought the whole harem down and dozens of women servants joined the howling. The romantic son-in-law waiting outside in

darkness was taken to be no more than a dacoit. Mohanty's men soon scoured the entire river-bank and physically carried away Govinda. He was repeatedly beaten up, bound hand and foot and thrown into a closed room, to know his fate next morning.

The morning however revealed only a shameful disaster. Govinda Chandra was at once rushed to the government hospital at Cuttack for medical treatmetnt. While he was convalescing, he received news of his mother's death. He came to know also that Indumati, unable to stand the humiliation of her dear husband, had committed suicide drowning in the river at the back of their house. Both elder Patnaik (Govinda Chandra's father), who was proud of his aristocracy, and the elder Mohanty (Govinda Chandra's father-in-law), who aspired for it, were shaken out of their delusions and left their homes to live as *sannyasis* unknown to each other. Young Govinda Chandra also left the Cuttack hospital with the same purpose in mind.

They all met at Mathura in ochre robes, each repenting for his blunders in life. Patnaik and Mohanty, the erstwhile social antagonists, were now devoted friends and comrades of each other. They stayed on at Mathura but sent Govinda back home to look after their estates. He returned and devoted the income of the two estates to various welfare projects for the people. He did not marry again, spending a wholly benevolent life as a prolonged *prayaschitta* (expiation) for his own youthful follies. Thus ended the story of *Prayaschitta*. Fokirmohan's last novel published three years before his death.

It is amazing how Fakirmohan, with practically no school education, could keep himself mentally abreast of his times, as to make even the latest scientific theories or political practices serve his creative purposes. Kamalalochana's essay on the Darwinian theory, aiming at reform of Indian society by making the young hero of the novel agree to marry below his social status, was undoubtedly the motive power that brought the plot of *Prayaschitta* to its desired fulfilment. It was the most modern means of getting university products involved in actions that led them towards the fitting end of the story. The

dissertation on natural selection in *Prayaschitta* is so well done that it proves the author's amazing native instinct for utilising whatever knowledge he had gathered for his creative purpose.

FROM THE CRUDE TO THE SUBLIME

And not in this only, but in all his other novels also, and in most of his stories, Fakirmohan uplifts the reader's mind from the crude to the sublime, adding depth and height to his creations, though his feet were firmly set on the common place. In the denouement of *Prayaschitta*, for instance, we find Govinda Chandra, convalescing in the hospital at Cuttack, plunge into a natural but serious dialogue with the visiting doctor on the deeper problems of life, such as, death, soul, etc., arising out of the death of a patient in a nearby ward. In his novel *Mamu* the clever author organises a conference of pundits, taking advantage of such customs among the Orissan aristocracy, on the eleventh day after death, the day of purification. The sublime debate affords a relief after the harrowing description of the young hero's tragic death, and is like a gem set in gold jewellery, each heightening the other's effect. In the midst of a crowded theatre of small men and women, with their hopes and desires clashing with one another, this discussion of eminent pundits on the nature of God and soul is a noble essay indeed. But true to his genius, Fakirmohan wrenches humour even out of such metaphysical discourses. The Telugu pundit, Ranga Bhatta Venkata Pantulu, is made to say thus in a sonorous Sanskrit quatrain :

"I say that along with the *Vedas and the darsanas*, let me be abundantly blessed, life after life, with the triple divine graces of chilli, tamarind and sour milk!"

Yet there is another noble aspect in Senapati's fictional creations. In all his works, both good and bad suffer. He has taken suffering to be the inalienable element of life, as it actually is. However, while the good in his fiction grows better through suffering, the evil comes out purified. He does not countenance ethical aberration in any shape, though he is all out for reform of whatever is outdated, harmful and irrational.

Sin with him is only maladjustment. The so-called sinners among his chracters often end their careers with the vision of the light of redemption through penitence and realisation of the divine law of grace for the sincerely repentant.

Thus Fakirmohan's works of fiction are complete and harmonious products, entertaining, edifying and spiritually inspiring even while they continue to be faithful mirrors of Orissa's life and society. In few works of art have realism and idealism so harmoniously embraced each other. And when we know that this man never had a plan to shine as a novelist and wrote only as the occasion demanded, we have to admit of a real master mind and salute it.

While *Chhamana Athaguntha, Mamu* and *Prayaschitta* are Fakirmohan's social canvasses, his *Lachhama* is his only historical novel and is a shining example of the master creator's innate sense of objectivity.

CHAPTER XIII

A RIGHT INDIAN BLOSSOM

LACHHAMA was serially published, like *Chhamana Aathaguntha,* in the *Utkala Sahitya* from 1901 to 1903, in which year, a century after the advent of the British in Orissa, delegates from all parts of the Oriya-speaking world met at Cuttack to demand their unification under one administration. Despite the fact that it is historical, and written in times surcharged with patriotic fervour, Fakirmohan's *Lachhama* steers clear of the loud and vulgar variety of chauvinism of any sort.

Though written by a Hindu, *Lachhama* ends with the final triumph of the Muslim Nawab Aliverdi Khan over the harassing Hindu *bargees.* In it, Fakirmohan's creative objectivity appears to be at its finest, since Hindus and Muslims appear and disappear as mere 'characters', reacting on one another only as such, and never as Hindus or Muslims representing mutually antagonistic faiths and attitudes. The deep sympathy with which the Hindu author has painted Muslims in distress is indeed remarkable. He has, on the other hand, aiming at the total welfare of India, chastised both the Hindus and Muslims where necessary for either's wrongdoings.

Considering all these, *Lachhama,* in the writer's opinion, might be taken as the earliest and among the few really 'Indian' books in modern Indian literature. If the Indian intellectuals of to-day analysed themselves and their works with genuine objectivity, it will not be difficult to realise that few books produced in India are truly 'Indian'. Few writers are 'Indian' in the sense that Kalidasa and Valmiki were. We all might be excellent as Bengalis, Telugus or Maharashtrians, but few among us now possess the needed vision, capacity or aspiration to shine as Indians. Good bits of even Rabindranath, not to speak of Bankimchandra, are

no more than just Bengal or Hindu. Looked at from such a perspective, *Lachhama*, written seventy years ago, might be judged a remarkable product indeed in modern Indian letters.

The outline of the story is as follow :

During the last quarter of the 18th century a party of up-country men and women was passing through the north-eastern border of Bengal and Orissa at the fag end of their long journey of pilgrimage to Jagannath. They were all on horseback and well armed against possible ambuscades, which were common in those anarchical times in our land.

But as ill-luck would have it, the party was suddenly attacked by a waiting band of Maratha horsemen, as it had just crossed the Bengal-Orissa border. In the ensuing skirmish the pilgrims were completely routed, with all their money and belongings looted away. In the fast enveloping darkness of the night, no one member of the pilgrim party knew where others were or what had happened to them.

Not far from where this brigandage took place, stood the fort of Raibania whose jungle-covered ruins still exist, two miles from the present town of Jaleswar in the district of Balasore. At that time, it was held by Samantaray Raghava Ratsing Bairiganjana Mandhata, a powerful Khandayat chief whose alliance was keenly sought for by both Muslims and Marathas. Both the *Raja* and the *Rani* were highly popular with their subjects and renowned for being humane and culture in a surrounding world of violence and loot. Mainly for the support he received from Raibania's brave Paiks, Aliverdi had routed the Marathas under the notorious *bargee*-leader Bhaskar Pandit round about the banks of the Subarnarekha.

One morning, Raghava Ratsing's court at Raibania was stunned to see a beauteous young up country woman, carried to the *Raja's* presence by his men from somewhere in the jungle. She looked stupefied and could not answer any of their questions. She was therefore sent into the inner apartments to be looked after by the motherly *Rani*. Slowly it was revealed that the young lady Lachhama was one of the

unfortunate survivers of the recent ambush on a party of pilgrims by a band of Maratha *bargees.*

But misery seems to always follow in the footsteps of beauty and virtue. Not long after helpless Lachhama had found parental protection and comfort at the fort of Raibania, the Maratha emissary, Pandit Sheo Shankar Malavira, called on its powerful Khandayat chief, with a view to negotiating for his alliance with the Bhonsla of Nagpur against Aliverdi.

There is a whole chapter in the novel devoted to the highly interesting dialouge between this Maratha plenipotentiary, strongly reminding readers of Shivaji's famous scholarly Brahmin envoy Hanmante, and the scholarly Brahmin orator Banamali Vachaspati, representing the court of Bairiganjan Mandhata of Raibania. The Vachaspati, with the pathetically barbarous attack on a helpless band of pilgrims to Jagannath so fresh in his memory, and with the sorrowing image of Lachhama, the tragic surviving victim of that Hindu vandalism on Hindus,. inside the fort, powerfully rebutted Sheo Shankar's anti-Islamic arguments. He proved the utter illogicality of invoking religion when good administration was all that mattered to the common man and woman in the land. He pointed out how Maratha looters had already laid waste vast unprotected rural areas of Orissa. Atrocities, he said, could not be excused, if committed by one's co-religionists. He said that, during his last trip to Navadwipa, he had talked to a white-skinned Christian priest at Calcutta and was deeply impressed by his humanitarianism and devotion to God. This new race from across the seven seas might subjugate both Hindus and Muslims by moral superiority alone, when both communities were sinking and suffering for the inhumanities committed by either.

The Maratha envoy left the court of Raibania with empty hands but determined vengeance. And it was not late in coming. A massive military expedition stemmed out of Nagpur to teach the obdurate Khandayat chief a political lesson, for being short-sighted enough to refuse the hand of friendship proffered by the powerful Bhonsla. The Maratha forces unexpectedly came upon Raibania exactly when its defences

were out of gear, its soldiers having been despatched in aid of Aliverdi to some distant battle field in Bengal.

Consequently, the historic fort fell. Its proud chief bravely met death after being a prisoner of the Marathas along with Vanamali Vachaspati. The Rani drowned herself, but not before forcing Lachhama out of reach of Maratha atrocities, with a few gold coins tied to her aprons. It was Vanamali Vachaspati's brahmin blood that, however, saved his head.

The tide of war now changed in favour of the Marathas. Aliverdi's forces were driven step by step up to Katwa in the heart of Bengal. But by that time, three years of almost continuous war had exhausted both sides. Meeting of emissaries was only a matter of formality. The *bargee* leader Bhaskar Pandit and Nawab Aliverdi agreed to meet in a silken pavilion midway between the two existing battle lines.

In the meantime, young and handsome betel seller had endeared himself to everybody in the Maratha camp, following the forces from battle field to battle field. In the camp of Aliverdi, a new military recruit named Badal Singh had become also quite popular. At a critical moment his pluck and sense of sacrifice saved even Aliverdi's head. That immediately raised him to the responsible position of the Nawab's personal bodyguard, to the chagrin of all the Muslim officers.

On the time and day fixed, Bhaskar Pandit made his red carpet entry into the silken pavilion at Katwa. Nawab Aliverdi personally welcomed him and held him in close embrace as a mark of his good feelings. But as the two dignitaries were just disentangling themselves out of their diplomatic hug, two persons pounced upon Bhaskar Pandit in a combined lightning assault, killing him outright. These two were no other than that young handsome betel seller of the Maratha camp and Aliverdi's trusted bodyguard, the young Havildar Badal Singh. At a signal from Badal, Nawab's waiting cavalry mauled down the unprepared Marathas.

The good Nawab, first stunned by this political murder, though much pleased at heart, declared Badal Singh as the

new Raja of Banabishnupur *pargana* in Bengal. He desired also to abundantly reward the young betel seller. But to the surprise of the whole grand assembly of dignitaries, he asked as his only reward nothing else than the consent of his partner-in-murder to marry a sister of his.

And topping all surprises, young Badal Singh sternly refused even this provocative proposal. He said that he was married to a beauteous and virtuous young lady, that he had given her his plighted word for strict monogamy all his life, and that he was determined to keep that vow, even though his young wife was long dead.

To the surprise of the Nawab and everybody else, both the betel seller and Badal Singh disappeared from Murshidabad overnight. A few days later, on the sands of the holy river Falgu at Gaya, two old ladies were amazed to faintly hear the following words, repeating those of the priest : "I, Lachhama Devi, daughter of Dheonkal Singh Verma....."

And right then, they heard also from another direction : "I, Badal Singh, son of Haribhajan Singh Verma....."

The two old women now made a bee-line towards the young man and woman, with tears of joy running down their wrinkled cheeks, ejaculating in jerkey accents, "Oh goodness gracious! Isn't it my darling Lachhama!", "Ah, dear me, this is my very life, dearest Badal indeed!"

Dheonkal Singh and Haribhajan Singh were two Rajputs of the Rohilkhand area in Uttar Pradesh who had become accomplices of Muslim brigands in their young days. Their wives, however, were pious Hindu ladies and had never approved of what their husbands were doing. After their son and daughter, Badal and Lachhama, were married, they became intimate friends. And the two ladies, through sweet persuasion, could gradually win their erring husbands away from paths of crime and sin and made them agree to go on all India pilgrimage as a process of expiation. But both lost their lives in the skirmish with the Hindu *bargees* at Godikhal, near the Bengal-Orissa border, as mentioned previously. At their villages up in Rohilkhand, all their properties were looted during their absence by their Muslim accomplices. Lachhama

and Badal, the lucky survivors of the skirmish, resolved individually to take vengeance on the Marathas for the calamity brought upon them. After the fall of the fort of Raibania, Lachhama disguised herself as a male betel seller and mixed with the Maratha forces, investing the few gold coins that the Rani of Raibania had secretly tied to her apron corner. Badal, after his slow recovery from wounds, joined the Muslim army of Aliverdi. All the while, each thought himself to have been the sole unfortunate survivor of the party that had started about two years ago from their village. Fakirmohan has demonstrated remarkable power for dramatic irony in this novel by making Lachhama and her old mother and mother-in-law spend a whole night in the same village, but tantalisingly missing an encounter. The joy of their final reunion at Gaya, therefore, can better be imagined.

In the epilogue, Fakirmohan makes the romantic and heroic couple Lachhama and Badal spend the rest of their lives as *Raja* and *Rani* of Banabishnupur. Nawab Aliverdi endowed the *killa* of Raibania on Lachhama. For their humanitarian qualities, good administration and charities, the new *Rani* and *Raja* became legendary.

But like Raibania and Murshidabad, the prosperity and celebrity of Banabishnupur also passed away after the death of Rani Lachhama and Raja Badal Singh. The great author ends the novel, therefore, with a sobering note on the perpetually changefulness of this world, by quoting the well known Sanskrit verse :

> "Where is that Mathura
> after the Lord of Yadavas left it ?
> And where the prosperity of Uttar Kosala
> after Raghupati's passing away ?
> Sober yourself man, therefore, with the
> thought
> That nothing whatsoever in this
> world is permanent !!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE RAINY SUNSET

THE last words in Fakirmohan's superb autobiography are : "My countrymen have amply rewarded me, in these last days of my life, for the very humble services to my nation and the books with which I am supposed to have enriched my language. In 1916, the enlightened Bamra State conferred on me the title of *Saraswati.* I was invited to preside over the congress of Oriya-speaking people held at Cuttack in the cold weather of 1917. This signal honour was more than I could ever expect of my compatriots. I now reverently bow, before I leave the stage, to all my readers of both sexes and all my countrymen."

The bowing old genius left the stage soon after, on June 14, 1918, at his lonely garden house at Balasore. But notwithstanding the well-deserved respect and celebrity that he got, Fakirmohan's old age, unfortunately, was one of continual physical as well as mental suffering.

Here is the tell-tale penultimate paragraph in his autobiography giving a graphic description of the old hero's personal miseries :

"Towards the end of 1915, Orissa's selfless servant, Gopabandhu Das, then a member of the Bihar and Orissa Governor's Council, broke his journey at Balasore while returning from Patna, and stayed with me for two days. On the morning of his day of departure, I saw him stand still before my sick-bed, steadfastly looking at me with tears flowing down his cheeks. After he could control his emotions, thus did he speak out slowly : 'I have fully come to know your condition during my two days' sojourn here. You are now

weak, helpless and lonely, depending on what comforts only servants could provide. For you, to be properly looked after, presence of near ones is most necessary'."

Fakirmonhan's last years were plagued with a series of serious physical setbacks. He suffered from varicose veins which laid him down for days with excruciating pain. Once he well-nigh died, after taking by mistake a strong, undiluted dose of sulphuric acid. And no sooner had he recovered after weeks of agony, a carbuncle cropped up with its own toll of suffering and discomfort.

ZEST FOR LIFE

But even this ailing, mentally tormented, old man displayed amazing vitality on occasions. His zest for life remained almost like that of a child. He zealously identified himself with everything fresh and hopeful, anything that spoke of progress of his nation or lessening of human misery.

In the first decade of this century, a band of university-educated Oriya intellectuals, under the inspiring leadership of Pandit Gopabandhu Das, had started a sylvan academy at the village of Sakhigopal, 11 miles north of the holy city of Puri. The highly educated teachers were content with pittances as salary, dedicated as they were to the regeneration of their nation. For a decade or so, the school became a live-wire cultural centre of Orissa, raising great hopes all over the Oriya speaking land.

And just a year before his death, we find old Fakirmohan, then above 75 years of age, at the Satyabadi school, behaving like one of the hundreds of students, though the teachers showed him profound respect. He played with the boys, joined them in recitation competitions, squatted and dined with them, and even personally washed his eating plates in perfect jollity.

He stayed three days at the school, charmed with the sylvan environs as well as the youthful dedication to patriotic causes. Once he joked with teaching staff, saying, "I am an ignorant man, you all know. What about my becoming a student here at your feet, to start the A.B.C. of the English language?"

But his parting words were those of a great patriotic prophet. Said he : "You all have planted here a veritable tree of freedom. I visualise that this tree will very soon blossom forth and bring out a good harvest of fruits. Gopabandhu is a most selfless patriot, with long experience in national work. That is how he has engaged you all in the right type of projects so necessary for the regeneration of our nation. I am sad that I will not live long enough to see our country free. But I hope you shall all enjoy the fruits of freedom before you leave this world."

SAGE OF SHANTI KANAN

As the last image of Fakirmohan, in his last years at Balasore, that of a sage in perfect harmony with nature and society, inspite of all his sufferings, here is the account left by Mrs. Bela Ghose of Balasore.

Says she : "This is out of my childhood memory. I must have been then between 9 and 10 years of age. I accompanied my mother when she was out to visit the house of a 'certain' gentleman at Balasore. The house itself was simple, bereft of all modernities. But I was delighted with the nice garden that surrounded it, containing as it did many unfamiliar exotic plants and trees. The garden was intelligently laid out and was most attractive with flowers and creepers of various colours, as well as with varieties of medicinal and aesthetic plants. The whole atmosphere appeared to be one of intense and scintillating beauty. And while my child mind was deeply drawn towards those clustered blossoms of various lovely colours on trees and plants around, in sauntered slowly towards us an unusually tall man, planting himself at last before us. I felt as though here was a great tree in the midst of shrubbery that is humanity. That man's total personality had marvellous harmony with the enveloping Nature. As like the Mother Earth at dawn, there appeared to be writ large on his face, some transcendental aspiration. We were both soon charmed with his talks and manners. He took us round the garden, explaining the history of each plant, its name, natural habitat, how he had got it and its medicinal and other virtues. After

looking around the garden, we came and seated ourselves in a corner of his house. He went on talking, but I can't recall what it was all about, at this distance of time. But I distinctly remember his last words spoken to me, when I touched his feet for his blessings : 'Please try, little mother, to know both your motherland and mother language.' It was on our way back home that I learnt from my mother that he was Fakirmohan Senapati."

This sage of *Shanti Kanan* at Balasore, passed away on June 14, 1918. That 'Peace Forest', though in ruins and dilapidation now, is a place of pilgrimage for the Oriyas. Those Indians who cry hoarse over national integration might make a rewarding visit to this *Shanti Kanan* to see a pavilion where its presiding catholic and humanistic sage used to pray daily, surrounded on all sides by befitting quotations from scriptures of all the world religions inscribed on the walls. It was certainly a fitting fulfilment to a life that had begun as a semi-literate labour-boy and an unwanted drop-out in society. Indeed, the life of Fakirmohan Senapati is nothing, if not a saga of unsuspected human potentialities. Lacking in modern education and rising out of a medieval environment, this man turned out to be most 'modern' in his outlook and way of thinking, at least in Orissa of his days. Brought up in poverty, knowing only the hard ways for an existence, accustomed to long spells of unemployment, he became in later life one of the most charitable and liberal-minded of men. Coming of a home, vicious with jealousy, and debasing meanness, he rose high above all petty thinking. Surrounded on all sides by dishonest practices, he remained thoroughly loyal and conscientious in the performance of responsibilities entrusted to him. The erstwhile semi-literate and semi-starved boy-labourer later became affluent and celebrated, living in comfort, and left behind extensive property and sumptuous garden houses, all acquired the hard way. But what was really amazing about this once Cinderella child, with a school education for only a year and a half, is that, he ushered in a new age in his language, and remains, on that account, everlastingly 'modern' in the awareness of his people. It is a veritable human case of Hans

Andersen's (Ugly Duckling), getting transformed into an amazingly lovely swan or a brilliant butterfly coming out of an uncouth chrysalis. Such miraculous metamorphosis did happen with this once child-cooli at the quay-side of Balasore, and he in his turn gave new life and shape to his nation's language, literature and national awareness.

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